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# Maturity through Misery: The Life of David Copperfield

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* as a seminal work of critical realism that explores the corrosive impact of a money-driven Victorian society on childhood and development. It argues that Dickens uses the protagonist's journey to critique a social system where financial imperatives violently truncate childhood, forcing premature adulthood. Through David's struggles with poverty, institutional neglect, and exploitative labor, the novel exposes how class and wealth dictate one's value and opportunities. The analysis demonstrates that David's path to maturity and creative identity is not a natural progression but a hard-won battle against systemic injustice, achieved only after securing economic independence. Drawing on textual evidence and biographical context, this study positions *David Copperfield* as a profound social commentary that merges the bildungsroman genre with a forceful advocacy for the vulnerable, laying the groundwork for significant social reform.

**KEYWORDS** - Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, Bildungsroman, Critical Realism, Victorian Society, Childhood and Innocence, Poverty and Social Class, Economic Determinism, Loss of Innocence, Social Critique

## I. INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens, a paramount figure of critical realism, dedicated his literary career to exposing the flaws and injustices inherent in Victorian England. His novels serve as powerful indictments of a society increasingly dominated by industrial capitalism and its attendant social hierarchies. Among his most poignant works, *David Copperfield* stands out as a profound exploration of childhood, maturation, and the pervasive influence of money. This novel, following the classic bildungsroman structure, traces the moral, psychological, and social evolution of its protagonist from an impoverished and orphaned child to an established writer. However, Dickens subverts the traditional coming-of-age narrative by foregrounding the brutal economic realities that violently interrupt David's innocence, forcing him into the adult world of labor and survival long before his time.

Dickens is among the most renowned English writers of critical realism. Through his work, Dickens exposes the flaws and injustices of Victorian England. This novel also unveils the harsh realities of a money-driven society and portrays a phase of adolescence in the protagonist's life, typically emphasizing their transition into adulthood and being a writer. Throughout this journey, they encounter the turbulence of the space between childhood and early manhood. Over time, the protagonist undergoes physical, psychological, social, and intellectual growth while navigating the challenges of their society. Ultimately, they assimilate into their community, leading to their maturation. Dickens's child characters are consistently conscious of their social class, status, and position, a factor that Dickens himself always considered.

It is a novel of development' which narrates the early emotional growth and moral upbringing of its central character David which follows the moral, psychological and social evolution of a protagonist, usually from childhood to adulthood. In this novel the hero poor Davy emerges along with the world. He successfully strives against the economical and societal problem. In his early childhood David had to bother about his livelihood and he has been expected to be gentle in his dreamy days. His all childhood to adulthood suffer revolves around his effort to be a person who can earn this errands by his own and thus livelihood dominant over his dreamy life." Money is a main theme of nearly every book that Dickens wrote getting, keeping, spending, owing bequeathing provide the intricacies of his plots, character after character is constructed round an attitude to money."<sup>1</sup>

David can show his identity and emerge as a creative writer only after resolving his financial difficulties and attaining independence. In his early days David finds that education is not affordable to all that's why Mr. Murdstone thought that reading books could not make money.



Miss Murdstone never could endure to see me untasked, and if I rashly make any show of being unemployed, called her brother's attention to me by saying, "Clara, my dear, there's nothing like work-give your boy an exercise"; which caused me to be clapped down to some new labour there and then." 2

He was always looked upon as a burden as if he was a useless creature living in the house. That innocent child living on the mercy of others was forced to find work as soon as possible because he was poor and orphan. The death of his father six months ago had doubled this curse. Murdstone says "I suppose you know, David, that I am not rich. Education is costly; and even if it were not, and I could afford it, I am of the opinion that it would not be at all advantageous to you to be kept at a school. What is before you, is a fight with the world; and the sooner you begin it, the better." 3 Throughout the novel, Dickens reinforces his central theme-that while money possesses great influence and its absence brings numerous hardships, it is not the ultimate determinant of life's true value.

The school named Salem House was like a dark haunted palace about which David says that he found it to be the most bleak and abandoned place he had ever encountered. David noticed two pitiful little white mice, abandoned by their owner, scurrying up and down inside a pasteboard and wire enclosure. They appeared worn out as they searched every corner of their shabby little castle with their red eyes, hoping to find something to eat. Because David is poor and an orphan that's why he recollect that he positively began to have a dread of himself as a kind of wild boy who did bite in the school while his class fellow Steerforth enjoys privilege because he is wealthy.

This novel narrates the story of David's struggle-filled rise in a very touching style, in which Hamid of Premchand, by buying tongs for grandmother Amina, becomes a victim of the social cruelty of becoming an adult before time and losing his childhood, whereas David, struggling in the streets of England, gets a job in a wine factory at the age of ten so that he can decide his future and by the age of ten he had faced every serious sorrow of life and now no difficult situation was surprising for him.

I know enough of the world now, to have almost lost the capacity of being much surprised by anything; but it is matter of some surprise to me, even now, that I can have been easily thrown away at such an age(of ten)." 4

David reluctantly started working in a factory where shillings were given more importance than personal identity and even at such a small age, being mentally insecure, you had to worry about your financial security. Giving priority to profession instead of toys was like snatching away the cruel childhood of a child where there was no importance to values in the name of freedom, only competition to show down each other. Referring to one such incident while working in Quinion's factory, Dickens writes-" I suffered in secret and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I. How much I suffered, it is, as I have said already, utterly beyond my power to tell. I soon became at least as expeditious and as skilful as either of the other boys. Though perfectly familiar with them, my conduct and manner were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They and the men generally spoke of me as the little gent," or "the young Suffolk". 5

With a compassionate heart, he creates the character of "poor little David," portraying the struggles of those at the lowest rungs of society with a deep sense of humanity. His detailed portrayal of critical realism brings to light the truth about society while expressing profound sympathy for ordinary people suffering in social darkness.

The story of the solitary David, left a prey to the cruel chances of the London streets in David Copperfield was an episode of Charles Dickens's life himself. Though he was not ill-treated there, the menial job, the miserable pay and the uncongenial companionship during work hours created a sense of bitterness in his mind. He always looked back with a shudder on the bygone days of his child-hood degradation. He was further embittered by the fact that his mother wished him to continue at the warehouse longer. Had Dickens not seen some happy days in his early life, his novels would have been darker. But because his happy days came so early and were so comparatively brief and followed by such immense misery, it left him with a sense of loss of something wanting' to haunt him to the end of his life. "6

Dickens believes that the ruling class intentionally creates a system where people are forced to move endlessly from one place to another, exhausting them. According to him, it is the ruling elite that drives people into extreme poverty and suffering. As a result, he portrays the harsh realities of the poor and their bleak living conditions. His aim was to

establish a healthier social system that supports and uplifts people rather than oppressing them and children can live in a green environment leading them to be a dignified citizen of the country.

In his novel *Great Expectations* Young Pip's aspiration to become a gentleman reflects the author's awareness of social class distinctions. When Pip encounters Estella, he experiences a sense of inadequacy and becomes acutely aware of the roughness of his upbringing. Pip says "The beautiful young lady at Miss Havisham's, and she is more beautiful than anybody ever was.....and I want to be a gentleman".<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, it shows that money is the only thing that was controlling the attitude and behaviour of everyone from children to old people in the society of that time. Money was more important than the person, this was the reason why an innocent child like David could not get love and upbringing in the family after the death of his father and he became an adult before his age. The pain of childhood being snatched away is found in almost every other novel of Dickens. In *Nicholas Nickleby* Smike asks Nicholas, "Shall I ever see your sister?" Nicholas replies, "To be sure....we shall all be together one of these days when we are rich, Smike".<sup>8</sup>

Dickens lived at a time when the notion of childhood was undergoing significant transformation. Born in 1812, he witnessed a society where children and young people made up a substantial part of England's workforce, with few laws or regulations controlling their employment. Consequently, children were often regarded as miniature adults. This was a harsh reality Dickens would have experienced firsthand, particularly during his early years working in a blacking factory.

When depicting vulnerable children, Dickens often modifies sentence structure and places adjectives directly before the noun, using expressions such as solitary child," little child," little, little child," and "lost child." This stylistic choice, we can assume, is intended to highlight their isolation and fragility.

Dickens merges two views of childhood: one that portrays children as both vulnerable and valuable, cherished yet susceptible to being lost. "Money continued to play a large part in Dickens adult life, for his father's frequent in providence, his sense of responsibility toward his brothers and sisters and then the claims of his large family all combined to make it an ever present necessity to him."<sup>9</sup>

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Thus Being a writer Dickens did more than any other author to bring attention to the hardships faced by children, laying the foundation for significant social reforms. For child psychiatrists seeking to grasp the impact of poverty and exploitation from a child's viewpoint, Dickens' novels will be an easy and effective source for them such as *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Oliver Twist* and *Little Dorrit*. Thus *David Copperfield* is the story of a boy who shapes himself through struggles and the challenges of adulthood molds him into a person of true values with a genuine sense of humanity.

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