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Autobiographical Elements in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*

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Charles Dickens, the great Victorian novelist, was born at Portsea, near Portsmouth, on February 7, 1812. His boyhood was one of extreme hardships, with meager educational opportunities. His father, owing to severe financial difficulties ended up in prison for debt in the Marshalsea. Charles was not a healthy boy and devoted more of his time to reading than sports. While he was supposed to be at school he had to stay at home, and when his father went to prison, he started working in a blacking factory at six shillings a week. It was this life of extreme challenges that finds expression in many of the works by the writer. There are very strong and clear evidences of the presence of Dickens' personal life in his novels and he himself accepts this also. For instance Dickens has immortalized some of his traits in the easy-going optimism of Mr. Micawber. The misery of his childhood situation is aptly pictured in David Copperfield's experiences in the wine warehouse of Murdstone and Grinby. Also, when the elder Dickens becomes a parliamentary reporter, his son, like David Copperfield, learns shorthand and enlarges his reading with a view to following the same occupation. The present paper deals with the autobiographical elements that appear in the novel David Copperfield. The paper also discusses how Dickens changes the personal elements to suit the literary purpose to make sure that the novel does not turn into an autobiography.

If we take a look at Charles Dickens' novels, *David Copperfield* is the most autobiographical. It is usually said about this novel that, "The pen that wrote David Copperfield was often dipped in his own blood" (Srivastava 113). In fact, this is true also up to a large extent as David Copperfield's experiences are Dickens' experiences to a large extent. About this book *David Copperfield*, Dickens himself wrote:

I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield," and "my interest in it was so recent and strong that I was in danger of wearying the reader with personal confidence and private emotions. (Bloom 76)

The first factor that makes a novel autobiographical is the identity of the persons who inhabit it. David, the protagonist is Dickens himself and it is evident from many incidents and feelings. The fact that he begins this novel as a narration in the first person is not a mere incident. Moreover, the suffering, struggles and achievements of David and his surroundings can be traced in many ways to those of Dickens' life.

The Headmaster of Salem House, Creakle, very much resembles the cruel Headmaster of the Willington House Academy, Dora is drawn after his first love, memories of Mary Hogarth and of his sister. Gerogry create Agnes. Above all, his portrayal of Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, are drawn

very much after his own parents. Mr. Micawber is a financially weak and irresponsible person like John Dickens who was imprisoned in the Marshalsea like Micawber in the King's Bench Prison.

The love incidents of David, first with Dora and then with Agnes, represent the two phases of Dickens's love. David's love for Dora Spenlow is Dickens' own love for Maria. The struggles of youth described in *David Copperfield* are variations of Dickens' own struggles. These incidents show us the emotions and anguish of Dickens' heart.

In *David Copperfield*, Dickens has tried to throw light on the evils prevailing in the society also. It was a time when power was concentrated only in the hands of a few capitalists and wealth was dominating the prestige. The condition of the prisons and workhouses was miserable. The industrialization of education had taken place and the schools were run only for money. But the worst of all was the condition of the children. They were used as a tool for illegal work and they were exploited in the workhouses from dawn to dusk for a few coins.

From chapter I to XV of the book, we are told about the childhood of David. They vividly portray the childhood scenes. The happy moments of David's childhood are very crucial when he stays with his mother and nurse Miss. Peggotty. Also, worth remembering is his visit to Yarmouth, on the sea coast, with Miss. Peggotty. David recalls:

We used to walk about that dim old flat at Yarmouth in a loving manner, hours and hours. The days sported by us, as if time had not grown up by himself yet, but were a child too, and always at play. (Dickens 35)

As soon as David remembers his mother he at once experiences the same image as he often used to experience. He says that she has "pretty hair and youthful shape, and Peggotty, with no shape at all, and eyes so dark that they seemed to darken their whole neighbourhood" (Dickens 13).

In the life of David the entry of Murdstone hits the visions of David like a stone. His second father comes as an intruder who compels the child to detach himself from the world of his mother. David has a horrible image of Murdstone. Regarding his step father Murdstone, David is of the view that Murdstone is an intrusive father who snatched away his carefree life and is responsible for breaking the bond of love between David and his mother. He says:

He patted on the head; but somehow, I didn't like him or his deep voice, and I was jealous that his hand should touch my mother in touching me, which it did. I put it away as well as I could. (Dickens 17-18)

It was a great shock for the child as he was declared as a culprit all the time. All the limits were crossed when a notice "take care of him he bites" was tied to his back on the basis of the information that Murdstone provides to the school. All the other boys used to laugh and jeer at him in the school. The headmaster Mr. Creakle was in the habit of canning the boys for the sheer joy of it. But he was especially cruel to David. The headmaster has no trace of humanity, and the boys remain thin shadowy figures. The teachers are cold blooded and cruel. They consider children worse than animals.

Dicken gives all the minor details of the brutality of Mr. Creakle. We are told that all the boys in the school were ill-treated and they have a giant like image of their headmaster. In the novel David remembers Mr. Creakle that he was:

The most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know who was one of the worst tempered men perhaps that ever lived whose business was to make as much out of us and to put as little in to us possible. (Dickens 79)

When the child leaves the school he goes to the worst work. He has to work in the midst of dirt and squalor, poor David has to slave from morning till night and is paid hardly enough to provide him with two square meals a day. The boys with whom he is made to work are the very scum of the city. Working under such unhealthy and suffocating circumstances is the worst part of David's childhood. From dawn to dusk he had to take up the job of washing bottles in the firm of Murdstone and Grinsby. David noticed that many empty bottles were lying there and a number of men and boys were employed to wash them. If the bottle ran short then they had to stick the labels on the full ones, or corks, seals and pack in casks. The agony of David was acute and according to him:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk in to this companionship; compared these hence for every day associates with those of my happier childhood ... would pass away from me little by little, never to be brought back again ... danger of bursting. (Dickens 49)

On the whole, David has been a very unfortunate child. He had a loving mother but she was a very mild creature, afraid to show her love to her son and he was deprived of parental love partly because of his mother's weakness:

The disastrous results of his mother's weakness are clearly revealed in David's account of his childhood suffering... incapable of understanding the child's bewilderment when he finds her remarried, she upbraids him and Peggotty for making her unhappy, when one has the most right to expect the world to be as agreeable as possible. (Needham 88)

As his mother dies, the little child is left alone and made to face disreputable men all alone. His experiences with his father only add to his miseries. His childhood is worsened with the arrival of the Murdstones. The Murdstones leave no stone unturned to inflict pain and suffering on the little child he is rebuked and insulted every now and then. David is quite literally treated as a dog. David, says Mr. Murdstone, "If I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do?" "I don't know" says David. "I beat him" says Murdstone (Dickens 43).

David loses his mother at an early age and he loses his nurse Peggotty too. It is then that he feels completely alone and decides to throw himself on the mercy of Betsy Trotwood. David is fortunate enough to get guidance and is adopted by Betsy Trotwood but not all orphans are as fortunate as David. There are, in all, four juvenile orphans and six half orphans. Luck favours David and he gets a home. "But for the mercy of God, I might easily have been... a little robber or a little vagabond" (Dickens 155).

What a child needs most is love and affection of his parents. David is a fatherless child and his mother has submitted to the wishes of her husband. The result is that the poor child suffers a lot

in his childhood, the period of joy and cheerfulness. He is deprived of love, affection; protection, security and proper education which a child needs. He wanders in the streets where he is most likely to be spoiled or starved to death.

You know what the streets are; you know how: cruel the companions that you find there are; you know the vices practiced there and to what wretched consequences they bring you, even while you are young. (Donovan 11)

Here “David is spoon-fed, coddled and bundled in shading clothes. He has found himself at last” (Hobsbaum 123). Once he is adopted by Miss Trotwood, all goes well in his life. He gets good education at Dr. Strong’s Academy, he finds a sympathetic and affectionate companion in Agnes. Then he falls in love with Dora, daughter of Mr. Spenlow, where he is apprenticed, and marries her. But his beloved wife dies after a short illness and Agnes comes to his comfort and both of them marry and live happily ever after words.

Even when writing about his personal life and the real incidents, Dickens did not, however, wrote the things as they were or had been. He was an artist and thus put things in the most effective manner. So he made use of the material form his own life as best suited his purpose. He drew from his own experience and observation but presented it with the help of his imagination. He idealized some incidents of his love and sentimentalized some. He used his personality with his art so that his novels are autobiographical as well as social documents.

Now, it can be said that while much of the story of David Copperfield is autobiographical it is not the mere and true story of his life. It is all fiction coloured with Dickens’ personal experience and feeling.

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