

CRITICAL REALISM IN CHARLES DICKENS'S IN "DAVID COPPERFIELD"

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ABSTRACT

Using a close reading through the strong analysis of the character development methodology through which the narrative shapes David Copperfield as Victorian novel which opens up interesting perspectives in reading I will highlight the influence of Critical Realism in the work of Charles Dickens. Furthermore, this methodology, which facilitates and accelerates the text comprehension although it is characterized by inter-textuality, will exfoliate remarkably the author's philosophy and ethics utilized in this work.

Keywords: *Critical Realism; Victorian novel; character development; text narrative; social voices*

A FEW WORDS ON CRITICAL REALISM AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL IN ENGLAND

In England the *Critical Realism* appeared in the late 1830s. About 10 years later it attained its full force and vitality, which is retained until the early 1860s. In the works of the most outstanding writers of the time certainly Charles Dickensⁱⁱ remains one of the most important voices in the British Literature.

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Certainly she always goes to New York of USA to do more researches as a scholar in the field of Literature, Translation Studies, Children' Literature and beyond. Beside this, she continues to be part of CARLA Program at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis of USA, where she is an expert for the Albanian literature and language. She has contributed in many journals and anthologies at international and national level; her contributions are included in collections like: "Canons of Children's Literature"; "Revista pedagogjike", "Gjurmime albanologjike", ACTA and so on.

ⁱⁱ *Note: Charles Dickens* is one of the greatest representatives of the 19th Century British literature of *Critical Realism* ever developed in UK as well as the most outstanding pen of the Victorian novel. In his works he dealt with important social problems and reflected some of the main contradictions of the social life in England during that period. Born in 1812 at Landport, near Portsmouth, in a petty bourgeois family, he developed a sense of strong affection to humans certainly designed for different levels of society. According to historians of that period the life of his family was a struggle for existence accompanied with efforts to escape from poverty and bankruptcy.

Dickens's first story appeared in 1833. It was followed by a series of realist sketches included in the collected volume *Sketches by Boz*. After this a flux of publications came out under his name enriching his potentiality and position in the British literature. As mentioned above Charles Dickens is one of the best-known and most popular writers in the English language. The day after his death, *The London Daily Times* deciphered him as emphatically the novelist of his age. He left a legacy of 14 novels as well as short stories, editorials, and sketches creating a considerable number of characters some of whom, such as: Ebenezer Scrooges, have entered the common vernacular.

His works address social issues, such as: poverty, injustice, and the danger of industrial progress espousing themes of childhood and familiar relationships reflective of the greater society and calling attention to the need for progressive education and to the victimization of the women and the poor. According to David Lodge, we agree on Dickens not only wrote novels which became classics of English literature in his lifetime; he transformed the methods of publishing fiction and thus changed the possibilities of authorship for his contemporaries and their successors. His books either in the English or in different foreign languages remained in print more than 105 years after his death and are required reading in many high schools and college literature courses.

During the period 1830-1840 we notice a rapid development of Capitalism in Britain. I also could state that this period coincides with the development of the Victorianⁱⁱⁱ novel as well, which aimed at combining the elements of the Gothic with a vivid imagined context. By the 1850 the fiction had shouldered aside the theatre, its old rival as the main form of literary entertainment. As with the drama at the *Renaissance* period it took intellectuals some time to realize that a popular form might be rather significant. As men have told old stories and read long prose narratives in the parameters of novels, the reign of novel has lasted so long as to appear again in England. At this point, I could make clear that people have been hooked after craziness vested in Gothic novel and after Scott's fiction. However, it was only in the 1840s with Charles Dickens that the novel again reached the popularity it had enjoyed in 1740s; and this popularity of greatly realistic novels seems to go with the development and consolidation of the middle-class democratic philosophy and ideology.

The most dominant feature of this stream as mentioned above remains surely Dickens for the super-production of his pen to be followed by Thackeray^{iv}. A less theatrical realism hardly comes up with the works of Mrs. Gaskell^v and Anthony Trollope^{vi} and George Eliot^{vii}, the historian of imperfect lives in their fullest social settings.

The Victorian novel is made serious by the Brontë sisters^{viii}, Charlotte and Emily and Anne Brontë, who remarkably attempted to be the most powerful female voices yet worth dealing with. *The Victorian novel* experienced the practice of *Critical Realism* as a sharp tongue of the literature in general addressed to social, economic and political problems and concerns in England.

READING DAVID COPPERFIELD

David Copperfield^{ix} is written by Charles Dickens after the events of 1848. This novel is distinct from the other novels written during the 40s as it is designed to describe the genre of novels about daily life. Facts from the autobiography of the author which constitute *archival continuum* employed herein, found the basis of

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: Victorian is a term that got extended beyond Queen's reign (1837-1901) to include William IV's reign from 1830 according to "A History of English Literature" written by Michael Alexander (2nd edition). For more refer to this source reading pp.257-321.

^{iv} Note: William Makepeace Thackeray wrote: *Vanity Fair* (monthly published in 1847-1848); *The Pendennis* (1848-1850); *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852); *The Newcomes* (1853-1854); *The Virginians* (1857-1859); *English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century* (1851); *The Four Georges* (1855-1857).

^v Note: Mrs. Gaskell Elisabeth Gaskell wrote: *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848); *Cranford* (1853); *Wives and Daughters* (1866); *Ruth* (1853); *North and South* (1855).

^{vi} Note: Anthony Trollope wrote: *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832); *The Warden* (1855); *Barchester Towers* (1858); *Fraley Parsonage* (1861); *The Small House at Allington* (1864); *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867); *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864); *Phineas Finn* (1869); *Eustace Diamonds* (1873); *Phineas Redux* (1876) *The Prime Minister* (1876); *The Duke's Children* (1880); *The Way We Live Now* (1875).

^{vii} Note: George Eliot wrote: *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); *Adam Bede* (1859); *Silas Marner* (1861); *Daniel Deronda* (1874-1876); *Romola* (1863-1866); *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866); *Middlemarch* (1871-1872).

^{viii} Note: Charlotte Brontë wrote: *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* (ed.1846); *Jane Eyre* (1847); *Villette* (1953); *The Professor* (1857); whereas Emily Brontë wrote: *Wuthering Heights* (1847); whereas Anne Brontë wrote: *Agnes Grey* (1847) *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).

^{ix} Note: *David Copperfield* (1960) (Volumes 1/ 456 pp. and 2/ 553 pp.) translated by Vedat Kokona accompanied by an *Introductory* about the life of Charles Dickens and a few words about the novel, published by *Naim Frashëri* Publishing House of Tirana with Isuf Alibali as an Editor. This product becomes re-published by *8 Nëntori* Pressing House in 1973 in Tirana.

this novel, although in many cases he has changed the scene of the action and new circumstances have been developed; and also he has changed the features of the real prototypes of his characters turned into *stereotypes* – displacement, slippage and condensation occur in the storyline. It is conceived to be defined as Dickens's most delightful book and a lucid autobiographical fairy tale. By a trick of narration the reader fully share the viewpoints both of the child and of the adult looking back. Page by page obviously the reader experiences Steerforth's seductiveness to David and grasps the casual rapacity behind it. However, the reader uses the lenses of Dickens's smile and his pity as well towards the child- bride Dora offering help to David holding his pens. The career of Steerforth further more tests the reader's ability to feel as Dickens wishes after the ruin of little Emily^x, a very fragile character to be commented later.

Reading carefully the novel, it is understood that the main idea of the novel is the triumph of the little man, who advances towards well-being and success by overcoming the hardships of the life thanks his determination, work and strong morality. The author has put clearly through the mouth of his protagonist - David "Never do carelessly the thing which you could devote all your strength, don't regard any kind of work with disdain- as I see it now, that has been my golden rule".

Charles Dickens certainly remained unable to orientate himself correctly to the political situation of the time hence he expressed his idealist views on the possibility of the triumph over the evil within the framework of the existing society by offering a strong criticism nurtured by the logic of his social strata. However, utilizing a deep observation in his life, the readers notice that he has enriched the range of problems in the realm of his literary creativity.

The autobiographical episodes of the novel, which altogether encapsulate an *archival continuum*, assume a broad social significance and literary significance as well. Through the ups and downs of David's life, the difficult situation of all poor children and youth emerges, and in this light it is discovered the new strata of the social life around him. The author describes in ironical terms the English law courts of that time, in which cases were dragged out endlessly and confused in that tangle over laws, which even those who applied them could hardly know. As he becomes acquainted at first hand with parliamentary life, nothing but prophecies, which never come true; explanations intended to deceive people; it was this discourse that stroke him gradually. Little David's sufferings in the hands of Murdstones and Mr. Creakle and his hostility to the villainous intriguer Uriah Heep, and other events in the novel, profoundly motivated from the psychological aspect of the *wider context* and *context at large*, broaden the *tableau* of the social reality of England in the author's time, a *tableau* which emerges indirectly in this novel. In this sense *David Copperfield* is an outstanding realist novel and the author has approached also a *practical criticism* in it opening up perspectives for *criticism of logic* and *Logic of Critique* equally.

In his description of the Peggotty family the democratic sympathies of the author emerge clearly. David's nurse, the kindly Peggotty, becomes a real mother to the young orphan. Moreover she is ready to sacrifice herself for him. The old

^x Michael Alexander (2007) *Charles Dickens at A History of English Literature*. UK: Palgrave Foundations 2 edition, p.289.

boat converted into Mr. Peggotty's house is a home for all, which are left forlorn. Living among these kindhearted people, who are always happy despite their poverty and the dangers they are obliged to face in order to secure their daily bread; obviously David begins to love and respect them. The death of Ham has a symbolic meaning. It not only enhances the figure of the personage, but also emphasizes the moral majesty of the world he represents; Whereas Mr. Peggotty – a figure almost fabulous in his ingenueness – catches the sympathy of the reader, who is obliged to consider Mr. Peggotty with respectful astonishment. The idyllic world, which the author has created in the upturned boat, is delicate and unstable. Its happiness is smashed by a few and powerful blows. And although the culprit - Streeforth, who causes this misfortune dies, the noble Ham also meets a premature death.

In the novel the writer contrasts these people with the representatives of the haughty aristocracy. The two sides have opposing concepts on morality, duty and obligations to the others – all this panorama is provided in scenes. Streeforth deceives the innocent Ham and seduces his fiancée named Emily. Educated with the prejudices of the circles to which he belongs he says: “*They do not have the same feelings as we do.*” The author condemns his thoughts and actions, but does not forget that the story is being told through the mouth of David - one of Streeforth's friends; so even when he describes his fragrant misdeeds, he doesn't abuse on him angrily as he has to do with the other negative phenomenon, but he speaks with deep pain of the friendship lost for ever. A very touching scene which remarkably features out the criticism one of a different social class could provoke and provide.

The scene understanding becomes explicit, when Mr. Peggotty meets Streeforth's mother showing not only the difference in their views, but also the deep gulf, which separates their two worlds. Mrs. Streeforth either doesn't understand the justice of the unfortunate old man's demand, or doesn't understand that he has the right to defend his honor. She thinks she can put an end to this annoying affair by proposing a sum of money in compensation providing a certain *cultural construct*, which the readers become aware of as they consider the class differentiation. Of course, this scene weakens the whole text, but it signals the tendency of the readers to practice *écriture féminine* within Dickens's major scope – punitive approach. In this manner Emily turns out to be displaced into a *peripheral figure* that no authority can attempt to, although she remains part of the reader's blog for the spices she produces thanks her social and gender conditioning. She floats in a specific *semiotic* in order to encourage a normative *classical - psychological tending discourse* strongly urged by David, the main protagonist in the novel. Given so, the reader comprehends the fact that the author has designed this act as a random element^{xi}, which can never be escaped by even the most meticulous and painfully deliberate composer of prose; and this stand is not at all *improvisary practice* of author's reflexive attitudes, as long as it collects

^{xi} Note: I affirm the statement a *random element* in commenting *David Copperfield* doesn't mean at all Dickens has never used the similar scene again in other literary products of his, on the contrary this element accompanies his characters' blog, as it stands for a certain scene which reality experiences. In this light Critical Realism counts a lot and at its best attempts the readers to pose attitudes and establish rules.

the *symbolic*, which dresses up the SELF – fixed and unified- in the surface realm of strict distinctions and laid-down structures through which language operates. Thus the *logic* of the discourse in this issue is located in the *displacement* and *condensation*. Evidently this makes the reason why seriously Emily's event weakens the power in soul meaning of the narrative.

The negative characters in the novel complete the realist presentation of life. When David was a child such monsters as the Murdstones and Mr. Creakle were engaged in his education. And many years later David describes events in the joyless days he has spent as a pupil at Creakle's school saying full of indignation " *When he threshed the pupils he felt that pleasure a hungry man may feel when he sits at the table full of good things... the blood boils in my veins, because I know he was an ignorant and vicious man, who had no more right to enjoy the confidence they had in him than he had to be in the post of the admiral of the commander-in-chief: very likely in those two tasks he would have done less harm than he did at the school!*" The end of Mr. Creakle's career is a devastating sarcasm. The readers understand that he is in his right place, with favorites so worthy of him as Uriah Heep and Littimeri – a very significant aspect of *violence* exercise to resume the justice.

Then most negative figure in the whole novel is Uriah Heep. He begins his career under the mask of hypocritical humbleness. Acting in this manner he gradually became the master of the situation in the household and over the assets of Wickfield. At this point, I could state that cruelty came out of his humility. His external appearance also serves to bring out his moral figure. Reading gradually the whole novel we come across the development of his character as a clinging thing like a snail and snake at the same time.

More characters to deal with are Dora and Agnes - a strong dichotomy is afforded in the novel - who occupy a special space in the novel. They represent those people worth dealing with as they show out all good human virtues and customs, which make Man be a Man. They make up a sort of contrast and as such the author affords certain situations in order to make the readers clear enough about the reality and life in closure. Dora is described as a pretty doll, incapable of coping with difficulties in life because of her way of living and environment she belonged to. Brought up in an atmosphere of closed restrictions, she loses her bearings at her first contact with the reality. Gradually she constructs her *secondary world* using her strong incompetence of poking her nose into her husband's business (holding his hand with the pen) and the willed oblivion of time in order to protect her family from the impossibility of being unprotected – disclosed. She protects her husband and her family from the needs of others by retreating her husband into a more private world built up by HERSELF, which for David is a wholly subjective world of love obsession where the creator – Dora- and everything else becomes an adjunct of and accompaniment to David's psychological condition. In this privatized second world the protagonists, both David and Dora, do become part of the community by a SELF KING. This perspective opens up the path to view their relation from the point of Marxist criticism and implement this reading approach also for deciphering the actions of the servants as well.

In addition I could also state that Dora is the most striking of all Dickens's female characters. She has always deserved a special attention as a special model created by Dickens. In the language utilized in order to describe her actions, the readers observe and become impressed by the *floating signifiers, random connections, improvisations* and *slippage* – essentials entailed in post-structuralist perspective of text comprehension as well.

Agnes on the contrary is the embodiment of goodness, of self-denial for the sake of happiness of the people she loves. On her face the hero notes a pure smile, which he has not seen on any other face. The author continuously repeats the calming and relaxing influence of her presence. She is distinguished by her altruism as the diametrical opposite of Uriah. Her figure seems to be dematerialized slightly on the pedestal, where the author has raised her. At this point, I could state that she radiates more light, virtue, and belief in true kindness. In this character the readers notice the element of romanticism more than in the other characters. As this is one of the characteristics of Dickens's style and poetics I allow myself to extend my stand on affirming the fact that Agnes is true-to-life character endorsed with features and actions the others either could wish to possess or not. She remains a figure determined by the political circumstances in her family; in this manner, she slightly turns out to be a *social assumption*, but her existence speaks for a *consumed* strategy, because David appears in her life. In this venue, I affirm the stand that Agnes became a *cultural materialism* that makes a division between *overt* and *covert* through David. At this point, she experiences constant progress.

Although *David Copperfield* is one of the author's most lyrical works, yet Dickens introduces nonetheless many comical situations and personages. A vivid character in the novel, that is drawn out with powerful mastery and poetics of a humorist is that of Miss Betsey, unpredictable with an implacable hatred for horses, those docile creatures on which she cannot bear to set eyes on. Another scene which creates situations of gentle comedy relates to the interpolation of the severed head of King Charles I, the first amidst the good, in half crazy thoughts of Mr. Dick, who is given by the author as a slightly deranged, rather childish but amiable man; who lives with Betsey Trotwood, although they are distant relatives. Strongly attracted by kite making and writing a "Memorial" as well, Mr. Dick definitely poses a very interesting character to deal with; in addition the perspective of some issues mattered out in the narrative lines hardly could be clarified without his affirmative solutions^{xii}.

Another mesmerizing character in the novel remains Mr. Micawber who is denoted as a happy-go-lucky man always given to flowery declarations, which his son greatly loved and respected nevertheless. Moreover in him the reader notices a melodramatic character, kind- hearted and foolish gentleman, who befriends David as a young boy. He suffers from much financial difficulty and has to spend time in a debtor's prison before moving to Plymouth. As an adult, David finds him a job with Wickfield and Heep. It is impressive also how Dickens has composed a dichotomy at the contrastive level to feature out sides of society: the punitive Mr. Mudstone is

^{xii} Michael Alexander (2007) *Charles Dickens* at *A History of English Literature*. UK: Palgrave Foundations 2 edition, p.289 - 290.

counterposed to the carnivalesque Mr. Micawber. However for all those who have studied the Dicken's works, Mr. Micawber stands for the author's father and there are no doubts on this attitude on him.

Of course, *David Copperfield* has certain similarities to Dickens' first works. Once again the figure of the villain in this novel represented by Uriah and beyond, who persecutes the kind - hearted hero, astonishingly emerges and as such remains. As usual in his first novels, the author clearly portrays ugly representatives of the contemporary society, so that the reader becoming indignant at vice, obviously values the force of virtue even more highly. The positive personages are contrasted sharply with the negative personages. In this novel the author deviates slightly from the principle of *happy - ending resolution*. Emily's happiness is destroyed for ever, while the Paggotty's and the Micawbers, Marta, and the poor teacher Mell manage altogether to improve their material situation; and this due to their decision to leave the homeland. The condemnation of the negative characters is not as effective either. At the end, the Murdstones are living very well by oppressing the new victim that has fallen into their clutches, while Uriah and Littimer are none too badly off in prison, where they have gained authority thanks to their "virtues".

David Copperfield is Dickens' most harmonious work in its inspiration. It is his most personal work more truly so than any other autobiographies he has ever written. The novel is written in the first person, in the form of the lyrical reminiscences of the hero. It has been pointed out that the first fourteen chapters are the most beautiful things ever written about childhood and youth. After the scene when Miss Betsey dismisses the Murdstones, the tension of the action falls. But when Dora comes on the scene a reviving breeze starts to stir in the novel. Dickens like few others knows how to describe the youthful love with its irresistible impulses and foolish actions, its joys and sorrows, full of doubts and naïve trust. The hero is recalling the events a long time later. Many insults have been forgotten, others David is ready to forgive. With mastery the author reveals the childish psychology and conception of the reality. He motivates why the Murdstones seemed more terrible to the little boy than a dangerous villain like Uriah seemed to him when he was grown up. At the same time, in the tone of the writer - now a grown up man, a gentle mocking at the naïve thoughts of the little David can be discerned. Humor, often irony and emotional pathos are frequently alternated with each other to make the whole text in its entity a very reliable source for entertainment and education.

CONCLUSION

I could strongly point out that the novel contains a complicated plot structure, a concentration on work and social worlds. It is conceived as one of Dickens' most wonderful comic creation as well. It is written from the point of its titular character looking back on ups and downs of his long life. The book has

certain feeling for the ungainliness and largeness of everyday life. Also it has the power and resonance of Dickens's social critique of a Victorian society that has very few safeguards against the mistreatment of the poor and in its industrial heartlands.

Conceived as Dickens's most autobiographical novel, mesmerizingly David's account for his childhood ordeal working in his stepfather's warehouse, and his training as a journalist and parliamentary reporter certainly echoes Dickens' own experience. A complex exploration of psychological development of David Copperfield is observed in reading the whole texture and further more the material, that makes up its fabric from the autobiographical accounts of Dickens, resonates *Dickensian critique* within the realm of *Critical Realism* viewpoint shaped in the *Victorian novel*.

Viewed from other perspectives, I could strongly stress out that this novel is regarded as a favorite of Sigmund Freud, which succeeds in combining elements of fairy tales with the open-ended form of *Bildungsroman*. In this light I could make clear that the narrative herein evolves round the act of recollection while investigating the nature of *memory* itself: how far should go back to see and what remains to be dealt with. Encapsulating the concern that the main protagonist manages "to forget and to forgive" – an approach to nurture the potentiality and empower his memory, the strong astonishing aesthetics and rich diction come out.

Regarding the text development technique what strikes the reader remains certainly within the confines of the descriptive technique based on prosaic realism: even more, the effect with its trenchant promotion of David's forthcoming incarnation is strongly poetic. The question on how to "*play with the memory*" remains open for reader's judgment and reflections afforded from text-comprehension - a path which leads to multiplicity of readings.

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