

Class Structure in *David Copperfield*

David Copperfield, is one of Charles Dickens's many famous literary works. Considered a fictional-autobiography by the many comparisons found to his true life, this bildungsroman follows the life of a young middle class boy named David. This novel, like many of Dickens's works, focuses on the one primary character; a Victorian novel written during Britain's industrial revolution, *David Copperfield* covers a slew of then contemporary social issues ranging from the suppression of women and the abuse of children, to the undisciplined heart and good vs. evil. This analysis of *David Copperfield* however, will focus on the social class structure in the novel; how *David Copperfield* questions the idea that one's class status is inevitable from birth, that the class structure is a necessity for order, and that the people of the lower classes predominantly come off as better people, in a moral context, which may allow some characters to transcend their class.

***David Copperfield* as a Bildungsroman**

Charles John Huffam Dickens, creator of some of the most memorable characters in literature, and arguably the greatest writer of the Victorian era, was a real world example of a bildungsroman. Born February 7th, 1812 in Portsmouth, England, to John and Elizabeth Dickens. Childhood was hard on Charles and his family, with 7 siblings, and his dad working as a navy clerk, money was tight. The BBC described his story thusly:

His own story is one of rags to riches. He was born in Portsmouth on 7 February 1812, to John and Elizabeth Dickens. The good fortune of being sent to school at the age of nine was short-lived because his father,

inspiration for the character of Mr. Micawber in 'David Copperfield', was imprisoned for bad debt. The entire family, apart from Charles, were sent to Marshalsea along with their patriarch. Charles was sent to work in Warren's blacking factory and endured appalling conditions as well as loneliness and despair. After three years he was returned to school, but the experience was never forgotten and became fictionalised in two of his better-known novels 'David Copperfield' and 'Great Expectations' ("Charles Dickens").

So it is understandable that Dickens would create a character that parallels his life so much that he almost transcends reality into fiction. While some of Dickens's own life experiences may have been too hard to include, or relate to with specifics, in many ways he created David as a fictional-autobiographical character. This would also explain why he calls David his favorite character, when he is known for so many: "Of all my books, I like this 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 favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD" (PBS, 1). David Copperfield, Dickens's favorite child, is paralleled to Dickens himself through a bildungsroman styled story.

A bildungsroman is a classification of novels that focuses on the personal growth of a primary main character; it follows their ethical, moral, or spiritual growth through life. A literary practice of Germanic descent, the Merriam-Webster dictionary traces its origin to 1910. Literature that gets classified as being a bildungsroman will most likely involve a story of suffering, hardship, and foolish decisions that eventually ends with a positive outcome; a heroic overcoming of unfortunate events that results in great personal growth and ultimately, a

life of happiness and/or success. Irene Simon, author of: *David Copperfield: A Künstlerroman?*, supports the thought that Dickens's novel is a bildungsroman: "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." (Simon, 1).

The fact that this book is a bildungsroman is an important part of the class structure concept as well. David was born into a well to do middle class family. Unfortunately for him, his father died soon after his mother became pregnant with him, and while his early childhood was happy, his mother's marriage to the insidious Mr. Murdstone resulted in his fall from the middle class life. After suffering at the hands of Mr. Murdstone and his sister's cruelty, David lashes out in self-defense, which results in his transfer to a broken down school run by a man possibly worse than Murdstone himself. He is supported enough to get by, but in no way is he treated as would be expected of his birth class. As he matures and moves on in life, we watch him struggle to fight his way back to where he believes he should be; all of this is given to us through the bildungsroman.

Social Class in *David Copperfield*

British society in the 1800's encompasses three primary social classes: the upper class, middle class, and lower class. David Cody, Associate Professor of English at Hartwick College describes the Victorian class structure:

"Early in the nineteenth century the labels "working classes" and "middle classes" were already coming into common usage. The old hereditary aristocracy, reinforced by the new gentry who owed their success to commerce, industry, and the professions, evolved into an "upper class" (its consciousness formed in large part

by the Public Schools and Universities) which tenaciously maintained control over the political system, depriving not only the working classes but the middle classes of a voice in the political process”. (“Social Class”)

Their class system is famous for its rigidity, and cultural ties. David Cannadine, author for The New York Times wrote that: “In part this is because Britain retains intact an elaborate, formal system of rank and precedence, culminating in the monarchy itself, which means that prestige and honor can be transmitted and inherited across the generations.” (Cannadine, Web). This class structure has the primary classifications previously mentioned, but in truth, the ranged class structure, once broken down, goes all the way up through the royal family.

In *David Copperfield*, the class system serves as more than just a labeling system; in this novel, the class system is a tool used to create challenges for people to try to raise their status, and fears to motivate others to hold onto theirs. Beyond that, the characters in this novel show their status in society partially based on the way they behave, especially when dealing with people from other social classes. Let’s analyze the three primary social classes, and the prominent characters from each one.

The Upper Class

The primary characters making up the upper class in *David Copperfield* include his school friend James Steerforth, and his mother, Mrs. Steerforth. Both characters live off old money, never actually having to work a day in their lives. As the novel progresses, we see

both characters behave with contempt and cruelty when dealing with middle and lower class characters.

The scene that stuck out most with James, is his argument with Professor Mell during class. Even though Mr. Mell is his teacher, and superior, because David let slip that Mell's mother lives in a shelter, James feels superior to him. In response to chastisement from Mr. Mell, Steerforth says: "When you take the liberty of calling me mean or base, or anything of that sort, you are an impudent beggar. You are always a beggar, you know; but when you do that, you are an impudent beggar" (David Copperfield, 107). In this scene, Steerforth is using his higher class status as a motivator to get out of respecting his teacher, which is only made worse when the headmaster, Mr. Creakle, fires Mr. Mell for being poor. By doing this, Mr. Creakle reinforces Steerforth's belief that he is better than Mr. Mell, simply because he was born with money.

This isn't an outside viewpoint in the world of *David Copperfield*. Even David, who always liked Mr. Mell, couldn't be angry with Steerforth, because he looked up to him for his social class. Before and after this scene, we experience Steerforth talking down to David, and still receiving nothing but praise and worship in return. Steerforth considers David, who is a middle class character, to be worth keeping around, but still beneath him. While he doesn't straight out belittle David the way he did Mr. Mell, he does nickname him "daisy," which denotes him as feminine, or beneath Steerforth.

Another example of Steerforth's entitlement and callousness occurs when he speaks to David and Miss Dartle about the Peggotty's: "'Why, there's a pretty wide separation between them and us,' said Steerforth, with indifference. 'They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt very easily...'" (303). Essentially,

Steerforth is telling them that the Peggotty's, being lower class, are so base, that they don't feel emotional pain like an upper class or middle class person would. They are like animals to him, it means nothing to him when he speaks down to or about them, because he has convinced himself it doesn't really hurt them.

As for his mother, Mrs. Steerforth, she shows her disdain for the lower class when she finds out that Steerforth has run away with little Emily. After reading Emily's letter, she says that Steerforth could never be with Emily, even if she was not a virgin when she returned. Mrs. Steerforth insults Emily, and after a short argument with Mr. Peggotty, says that "Since you oblige me to speak more plainly, which I am very unwilling to do, her humble connexions would render such a thing impossible, if nothing else did" (David Copperfield, 474). Because she is upper class, her son is also upper class, and Mrs. Steerforth fears that association with Emily would tarnish her son's reputation. In revealing why she picked the broken down school she did for Steerforth's education [Salem House] because she wanted her son to be treated with reverence: "'It was not a fit school generally for my son,' she said; 'far from it; but there were particular circumstances to be considered at the time, of more importance even than that selection. My son's high spirit made it desirable that he should be placed with some man who felt its superiority, and would be content to bow himself before it; and we found such a man there'" (305). Mrs. Steerforth is obsessed with her son, and his status as an upper class man, that she would send him to a less worthy school with bad employees and conditions, because there, her son would be treated like royalty. The characters in this novel that represent the upper class are clearly lacking in moral compass, considering themselves to be above everyone else.

The Middle Class

Most middle class characters are successful business owners, and members of the specialized working classes: teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc... Surprisingly, the middle class characters in *David Copperfield* are much the same in context of social viewpoints; however, some difference exists in the opportunity that becomes available to middle class characters, redemption. Specifically, I will focus on the similarities and differences between David Copperfield and Uriah Heep. This issue really speaks to the chaos which ensues if characters do not have safety and stability in their lives, as mentioned by Bert G. Hornback in his article "Frustration and Resolution in *David Copperfield*," Hornback says that "The world of David Copperfield is fully a world of chaos, and the threats of chaos, and what the good people must do, for their own safety and sanity, is find and re-establish order" (Hornback 653). Here, we will see the good choices vs. the bad choices one can make when life puts you in a difficult place.

If we saw both characters' childhoods through the bildungsroman that we were offered for David, we would see a surprisingly similar story. Both David and Uriah were raised in middle class families, and both also grew up without fathers. Because of this, both characters not only suffered financially, but became especially close to their mothers, one could say to a semi-obsessive degree. It's difficult to make full comparisons for these characters, since we only see a limited view of Uriah, but part of what makes him so important, as a character, is that he is the Yang to David's Yin. We are expected to take the things that are obvious, like the way both David and Uriah are fighting to hold on to the pride of being middle class, and make the assumption that even more similarities would be found if we saw all of Uriah's life.

What becomes paramount to the story however, is the vast array of differences we discover in David's and Uriah's moral compass. David, growing up sheltered and spoiled by his mother and Peggotty, has a mild sense of entitlement. As he goes through the story we see examples of his naivety when he supports Steerforth over his teacher, when he refuses to associate with the other kids at Murdstone and Grinby, and when he romanticizes the life of the Peggotty's, but what's most important is how he grows as a character through the progression of the novel. With his first wife, Dora, we see David acting much the same as his step-father, Mr. Murdstone, did with his own mother. He looks down upon her, thinks she can't do anything right, and always tries to change her. But after her death, and his hiatus away from Britain, David comes back as a more experienced man, marries the woman of his dreams, and becomes a writer.

We do not see the same changes in Uriah Heep. From the beginning, Uriah is described as a shady character, when David first sees him in chapter XV, he describes him as "cadaverous". David goes on to say, "We got out; and leaving him [Uriah] to hold the pony, went into a long low parlor looking towards the street, from the window of which I caught a glimpse, as I went in, of Uriah Heep breathing into the pony's nostrils, and immediately covering them with his hand, as if he were putting a spell upon him" (229). Uriah embodies all the wrong choices from the very beginning. When we see him, we don't get the naivety image we were given with David; instead, he is shown as a cold, calculated character. His initial negative actions include encouraging Mr. Wickfield to drink, and falsifying documents to blackmail him into making Uriah a partner in his company. Like David's Agnes, Uriah is given the chance for redemption via prison, but unlike David, he refuses to change his way, continuing to play the part of deceitful and "umple," even in prison.

Beyond this, we can draw conflict between these two men because of another middle class character, Agnes Wickfield. Agnes is the third corner of a love triangle with David and Uriah. Agnes plays two roles here. First, she can be seen as a sort of middle class clarification; by that I mean, whichever character manages to get her has achieved middle class success. The work that they have put in would finally have come to fruition. Second, she can be seen, religiously, as the lamb, Bathsheba. This point was emphasized by Eitan Bar-Yosef in his article “It’s the old story’: David and Uriah in II Samuel and “David Copperfield,” Yosef says:

“The lam is Bathsheba; but it is also Agnes, Agnus Dei, Lamb of God. Unlike Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite in II Samuel, Agnes and Uriah Heep are not married. Yet, growing up in the Wickfield household long before David enters it, Uriah naturally regards himself as a rightful husband for his employer’s daughter-whom he continually calls his own” (Yosef)

The interconnection between these characters, drawn into a religious comparison, denotes the idea of redemption, of good vs. evil, of right vs. wrong. The simple act of putting a religious connection into this love triangle alludes to everything we’ve been discussing about David and Uriah.

The Lower Class

The lower class, at least in Charles Dickens’ eyes, is where the majority of just and moral characters reside. Not only do most lower class characters simply act in a more loving and understanding way, but you will also notice that the complete nuclear families are all in the lower class. The characters from both the upper and middle class came from incomplete homes. Steerforth, David, and Uriah are all without fathers, and Steerforth’s mother is without

a husband. So because there is an emphasis on families within the lower class, I will analyze two complete families: The Peggottys and The Micawbers.

The Peggotty family consists of: Clara Peggotty, David's childhood maid; Mr. Peggotty, Clara's brother; Emily and Ham, Mr. Peggotty's niece and nephew; and Mrs. Gummidge, the widow of Mr. Peggotty's former partner. Mr. Peggotty is poor. He lives in an upturned ship on the coast, and makes his living as a fisherman. Even so, he still takes in his niece, nephew, and the wife of his dead partner, which shows his moral goodness. Clara is the beloved maid/nanny of David, and she takes over as his mother figure after he loses his mother and little brother. Emily becomes David's fast friend, and Ham is a simple but kind man, that dies in the ultimate self-sacrifice, as he dies trying to save James Steerforth, the man that stole his cousin away. Mrs. Gummidge is sad and mooney, but kind at heart. We ascertain the entire family's goodness with how fast David falls for them, even though they are from the lower class, and they are morally sound in that they take care of each other, even though they aren't technically a normal family. Especially in the case of Mrs. Gummidge, who is of no blood relation to anybody else in the home; even so, Mr. Peggotty accepts her constant self-pity and complaining with grace, calmly and kindly responding with positive comments and reassuring gestures. The Peggotty family is very poor, but at the same time stable. Our other lower class family however, creates more amusing situations with their financial woes.

The Micawbers, are made up of Mr. Micawber, his wife, Mrs. Micawber, and their slew of children. Mr. Micawber is arguably the most interesting character in the entire book. Believed to be modeled off of Dickens' own father, Mr. Micawber and his family spend the entire novel trying to usurp the middle class, with get rich quick schemes and dramatic rhetoric. Their family is kind and loving, but they are terrible with money. It goes so far, that

David witnesses Mr. Micawber being sent to debtor prison. As far as their treatment of other people, the Micawbers are morally good, but an argument can be made against their morality in the sense that they spend money they don't have, and fail to repay debts.

While both families care for their own, and anyone around them in need of a helping hand, they also have situations that require redemption. In the case of the Peggottys, Emily runs away with Steerforth, ultimately resulting in her shame, and his, and Ham's, deaths at sea. After this great shame, her family jumps to her support immediately, because the Peggottys are moral and good, but she requires more for her own personal forgiveness, and social redemption. As for the Micawbers, they require redemption for the plethora of debt they amass throughout the story, and the schemes they tried to use in place of good honest work.

Australian Escape

After the trials and tribulations the Micawbers and Peggottys went through, they both ultimately decided on moving to Australia to start over fresh. It's important that their redemption must come in Australia, because it shows that their redemption isn't entirely legitimate, that it's more of a loophole than anything else. In Britain, the inability to pay back debts by the Micawbers, and Emily's lustful behavior with Steerforth, would never have been forgiven. For the rest of their lives there would be shame, but by going to Australia, they are allowed a fresh start. In Australia, Mr. Micawber and his family do much better for themselves, and Emily feels better about her mistakes through hard labor. Personally, these characters were able to escape their mistakes, but socially, nothing has changed.

Why are their mistakes not forgiven on a social level? Because they weren't able to achieve their forgiveness/redemption in Britain. To leave the country in order to become who they wanted to be, they basically made the best of social exile. Australia was originally a penal

colony formed by Britain; it was where all the undesirables were sent to keep local prisons from filling up. The sort of thing the Micawbers and the Peggottys did in Australia were the exact same as the original convicts sent down to Australia in the early 1800s:

“The discipline of rural labour was seen to be the best chance of reform. This view was adopted by Commissioner Bigge in a series of reports for the British Government published in 1822-23. The assignment of convicts to private employers was expanded in the 1820s and 1830s, the period when most convicts were sent to the colonies, and this became the major form of employment.”

(“Convicts and the British Colonies in Australia”)

In a way, this move paints the Micawbers and Peggottys as undesirables in Britain. It alludes to the idea that they are convicts being sent away. So in that way, they didn't escape the social norms of Britain, but simply found a way to make themselves feel as if they had. This lends to the idea that the British social class structure is rigid, because people will move halfway across the world to try to escape it, and make something of their lives. What matters most is that the Peggottys and Micawbers find a place that they can be successful. While characters can not escape the class that they were born in while living in Britain, these families find a society that allows you to find your place in the class structure based on hard work and merit, instead of birthright.

In the upper class, we saw characters that felt a complete moral superiority to everyone else. They did what they wanted, to whomever they wanted, and felt no remorse. In the middle class, we see that while there is still a sense of entitlement or superiority, characters can still be morally good, the difference is now in a personal choice that upper class characters do not seem privy too. And finally, in the lower class, we saw morally good people who made

mistakes, and did what they had to in order to attain redemption. Another important aspect of *David Copperfield*, in relation to class, is how David himself views the characters in different classes.

David's Views on Class

As the novel progresses, the readers are given a window into all aspects of David's life. We see what he sees, feel what he feels, and think what he thinks. This is important to the class structure concept, because David offers us a personal view of how people saw others around them based upon their class. His view allows readers to better understand the differences in social class, because for American citizens, it's difficult to compare the British class systems rigidity. For David, life was a struggle to maintain the middle class lifestyle that was, in the eyes of the 1800's British class system, his birth right. This is an important thing to understand because it influences why he looks at people of different classes the way that he does.

After Mr. Murdstone sends David away for school, James Steerforth becomes David's best friend, and mentor. Instantly, David notices his standing as a member of the upper class, and becomes enamored with him, and everything he stands for. We see David giving Steerforth his money, trusting him with its care and usage, and even making excuses for Steerforth when he behaves so disrespectfully to Mr. Mell. Even when Steerforth and Emily run away, David never truly comes to the point of hating him. In the time David's character lived, people idolized the upper class, it can be said the hope of achieving this status is the reason people migrated to the Americas in the first place. This deep rooted fantasy was so sought after, and in Britain, so impossible to obtain, that it sparked a revolutionary migration to a new world. That, if nothing else, should explain the way people felt about the upper class.

The middle class: the doctor, lawyer, accountant, author, was the average well to do person. Someone who didn't make enough money to do whatever they wanted, but never had a need for a breadline either. To David, the middle class is his destiny or birthright. He grew up neglected by Mr. Murdstone and his sister, and throughout the novel, we watch him struggle with the fear that he won't live up to his potential. When working at Murdstone and Grinby, David says that he needs to be the best, in order to keep himself from being like the other kids that work there:

“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. But I kept my own counsel, and I did my work. I knew from the first, that, if I could not do my work as well as any of the rest, I could not hold myself above slight and contempt. 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.” (172)

David never thought about the situation that brought these other boys to work at Murdstone and Grinby. As far as he is concerned, he is too superior to even socialize with them, because they are in a position more natural to their station, in his opinion.

The way David looks down on his fellow employees also shows his view of the lower class. While he loves the Peggottys and the Micawbers for their loving natures, he clearly respects the divide in classes, and considers himself above them. Most of the lower class characters that readers are introduced to come from the first 12 or 15 chapters, the ones that focus on his youth. Once he is a young man the lower class characters, other than the Peggottys and the Micawbers, are not noticed or mentioned

further. This alludes to the idea that David only considered the lower class worth his time when he was an immature child.

Conclusion

The information supports the belief that class structure in Britain was rigid. As the story progresses the reader was introduced to less and less characters of lower status, and the focus of the story became more focused on important upper and middle class characters. While David and Uriah both fought to attain the middle class status they believed they deserved from birth, it turns out that their struggle wasn't with being considered middle class, as much as it was receiving luxuries and esteem they felt was lacking, due to neglect or missing family ties. The only characters that were truly able to transcend their class status in any way, had to move to another country, so they could be judged on their work ethic and merit, instead of birth esteem. Which is important, because the only characters offered the chance to transcend class, even in this way, are the Peggottys and Micawbers. These families are both lower class families known for their kindness and acceptance, showing that Charles Dickens felt they earned the right to improve their status, even if it requires relocation.

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