

Chapter : 4

Charles Dickens : David Copperfield

Introduction to Charles Dickens

Born on 7 February 1812 in the south of England, Charles Dickens was the second of eight children in the family of John Dickens, a Navy clerk. Though he was a warm-hearted person, John Dickens had no sense of responsibility, and was often in debt. Being short of money, the family moved to London, but John fell even more deeply into debt, and was sent to Marshalsea prison. He was joined there by the rest of his family except Charles, who was sent to work in a blacking factory. Charles was full of shame and misery at his family's condition, and hated his job in the factory where he had to undergo humiliation and ill-treatment. He could never forget this period of disgust and loneliness in the factory, which is often reflected in his novels when he writes about childhood with compassionate understanding. He began his writing career by writing short pieces for magazines, which appeared in a volume Sketches by Boz. He began writing a humorous monthly serial, Pickwick Papers, which brought him fame and popularity. In fact, many of his novels first appeared in serial form and were later published as novels. Some of his well-known novels are Oliver Twist (1837), David Copperfield (1849), A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Great Expectations (1861), & many others. The age in which Dickens lived and wrote was the Victorian Age, the reign of Queen Victoria, a time when modern Britain developed and evolved. It was also a time of prosperity as well as change because the Industrial Revolution had introduced machine production and made the factory the centre of work. The growth of cities created many social problems like poor housing and sanitation, crime, disease, poverty, etc. As wages were low and housing often overcrowded, even women and children were forced to work in factories for long hours. Dickens was deeply concerned about these social problems and this

concern can be seen in all his writing. His sympathetic awareness of contemporary social problems , and of the lives of the poor, the sick, and the unfortunate, is a constant feature of his work.

Summary of David Copperfield

David Copperfield is deeply attached to his mother, who was widowed six months before his birth. His early childhood is a very happy one, and once, he goes with his nurse Peggotty, for a holiday to Yarmouth. They stay with her brother Mr. Peggotty and other relatives in a boat-house. On his return, David finds that his mother has re-married. He is ill-treated by his stepfather, Mr. Murdstone, and sent away to Salem House, a school run by a cruel man named Creakle. After his mother's death, David is sent to work for a few shillings a week at Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse in London. He lodges with Mr. Micawber and his family and becomes very attached to them. But they leave London and David decides to go and find his great-aunt, Miss Betsy Trotwood, who lives at Dover. But he is robbed of his money and has to walk the whole way to her house. Miss Betsy is very kind to him and sends him to an excellent school in Canterbury, where he boards with Mr. Wickfield and his daughter Agnes. Mr. Wickfield has a weakness for drink and his cunning clerk, Uriah Heep, takes advantage of this. After leaving school, David is articled to the firm of Spenlow and Jorkins in London. He meets Mr. Spenlow's daughter, Dora and falls madly in love with her, but Mr. Spenlow refuses to consider him as a son-in-law. Miss Trotwood loses her money and comes to live in London. David works extremely hard and becomes a successful reporter and writer.

After Mr. Spenlow's death, David and Dora are married. Dora is pretty but silly and immature, and wishes to be regarded as a "child wife". She loses a child, is very ill, and weakens slowly and dies. To forget his grief, David goes abroad and is away for three years. During this time, he realizes that he loves Agnes, but is sure that she regards him as a brother. He returns to England and realizes that she has always loved him. They are married. Miss Trotwood's fortune is restored, and Uriah Heep is imprisoned for fraud. Mr. Peggotty's family, as well as Mr. Micawber's family emigrate to Australia and live happily there.

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4.0 Objectives

Friends, a study of this chapter will enable you to

- a) Analyze the characters in the novel
- b) Analyze the structure of David Copperfield
- c) Study the use of humor and pathos in the novel
- d) analyze the structure of the novel

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we could see how Jane Austen reflected contemporary society in her *Pride and Prejudice*. David Copperfield, which Dickens wrote a few years later, also presented a picture of contemporary society, but the difference is that Austen restricts herself to the upper middle class of rural England, while Dickens's canvas is a larger one encompassing the middle class of his time, particularly industrialized London. Another distinguishing factor was that Austen was not concerned with social problems while Dickens was deeply concerned with the social issues of his time. Austen's characters develop and grow, while Dickens's characters are usually caricatures and rarely develop or grow. This is why critics comment that her

characters are more rounded and true to life, while his characters are more flat and usually lack depth.

4.2 Dickens's treatment of characters in David Copperfield

4.2.1 The men characters

The central character in the novel is David, as all the important incidents as well as characters revolve around him. He is born six months after his father's death and is brought up under the loving care of his mother and nurse Peggotty. After his mother's remarriage, her new husband Mr. Murdstone ill-treats him. When he protests, as a punishment he is sent to Salem House, where Mr. Creakle, the headmaster, bullies and humiliates him. David's childhood is presented vividly and he is shown as sensitive, honest and loving, qualities which he retains even after he grows up. He is also intelligent and observant, but is also too innocent, trusting and thoughtless. He does not realise that Steerforth is spending his money under the pretext of taking care of it, and does not see his true colours even when he sees his behaviour towards Mr. Mell and Rosa Dartle. He continues to admire him and introduces him to Mr. Peggotty's household which he ruins, and cannot think badly of him even when he runs off with Emily. He is often cheated by servants and waiters, particularly after he marries Dora. This incompetence with servants indicates that David lacks firmness and self-discipline. In fact, as he admits, his marriage to Dora is a mistake committed by his "undisciplined heart", because he falls in love with her at first sight, before he knows what kind of person she is. This is why, though their marriage is not an unhappy one, David always feels that something is missing because Dora is never a companion to him. He is so shortsighted that he never realises that he cares for Agnes or that she loves him. This is why, though David is a victim of circumstances, he is also responsible for much of his unhappiness.

Though he has many shortcomings, David has many good qualities that endear him to his friends and relatives. Though he is treated badly by his stepfather and by Creakle, he preserves his good nature and humanity and carries with him an atmosphere of cheer and goodwill wherever he goes. His nurse Peggotty, Ham, Mr. Peggotty and Emily

all have great affection for him, and even Miss Betsey, who had been disappointed at his not being a girl, develops love for him. Miss Betsey advises him never to be mean, vulgar or cruel, and he never forgets this advice. There is no meanness or pettiness about his conduct. He is honest, kind and conscientious. He is grateful to Miss Betsey for her love and kindness, and regards it to be his duty to look after her and give her moral support when she loses her money. He takes up a job and works with diligence and sincerity. David is very sensitive, and responds to the love as well as the insults meted out to him. He is always loyal to his friends like the Peggottys, the Micawbers, Steerforth and Traddles. He likes being of service to others eg. he helps Peggotty to settle her affairs after Barkis's death and helps the Micawbers to sell their belongings to pay their debts. He is devoted to Dora, and is never impatient with her inability to deal with housework. During her illness, he looks after her with great devotion. He loves Agnes sincerely and proves to be a very good husband to her when he marries her. David is a gifted young man and has always been fond of reading. These qualities help him to be a good writer.

Mr. Micawber is one of the greatest comic characters created by Dickens. He is a stout, middle-aged person with hardly any hair on his large, shining head. David lodges with him when he is employed with Murdstone and Grinby's in London. Mr. Micawber has a big family to support, and is always in debt. As his debts keep mounting, he sells off all his household furniture and valuables. In spite of these financial difficulties, Mr. Micawber is always optimistic. When his creditors are a bit too pressing, he is full of grief, but soon recovers, and goes out, humming a tune with more cheer than ever before. Though he is always in the grip of acute poverty, and just a step away from the debtor's prison, he has the ability to remain cheerful. He makes eloquent speeches in a high-flown style. After talking for a few minutes in a bombastic style, he utters the phrase "in short" and paraphrases what he has just said in simple language. In spite of his financial difficulties, Mr. Micawber is always willing to help others. He makes every possible effort to make David's stay with the family comfortable, and even when he has to leave the house, he tries to make the best possible arrangements for him. He comes to Miss Betsey's rescue when she loses her money to the cunning Uriah Heep, and exposes the plot thus saving her from disaster. He, along with his wife, is

always hoping for something to turn up, and their hopes are realised when he goes to Australia and becomes a successful magistrate. His ability to handle Uriah Heep shows that he is an intelligent and courageous man. When Uriah Heep is being exposed, he tries to snatch the documents from Mr. Micawber's hands, but the latter is clever enough to expose his evil designs. He exposes Uriah's plans very methodically and reads out the charges one by one, substantiating everything with proof. This shows that he has studied law and is making good use of it. It is therefore not surprising to hear about his success in Australia.

Uriah Heep, Mr. Wickfield's clerk, is the villain of the novel. He pretends to be humble but actually makes a treacherous plan to achieve his aim of becoming Wickfield's partner. He is greedy, very dishonest and nasty. His humility is a mere mask and he is actually very clever and cunning. He manages to extract information about Mr. Wickfield's business from David, who is reluctant to part with it. He employs Mr. Micawber as a clerk, pays him poorly, but lends him money, so that he can later use him as a clerk. Mr. Wickfield has a weakness for wine and is grief stricken at his wife's death. Heep exploits these weaknesses and gradually gains complete control over his affairs. He studies law so that he may know about legal intricacies to trap Mr. Wickfield and forges the signatures of both Mr. Wickfield and Mr. Micawber to draw up documents to achieve his aim. He draws up a deed in the name of Mr. Wickfield saying that he has left his business in Heep's hands. He also draws up a bill of sale of Mr. Wickfield's furniture for which he has to pay Heep an annuity, thus making him dependent on him. He tries to make him use Miss Betsy's money for business, but actually pockets it himself. He pretends to save Mr. Wickfield but actually ruins him. Above all, his ambition is to one day marry Agnes. He knows this is impossible because he lacks personality, education, as well as social status, and therefore uses evil means to realise his ambition.

Heep's treacherous behaviour brings a lot of suffering to many. Miss Betsey is almost on the verge of ruin. When Mr. Wickfield realises that Miss Betsey has lost her money because of him, he experiences mental strain which affects his health, and Agnes, in turn suffers when she sees her father's condition. David has to not only discontinue his studies to take up a job with Dr. Strong, but his marriage with Dora

also falls into trouble. The only sympathy one feels for him is when he describes his poor, difficult childhood, when he was forced to learn how to be humble.

James Steerforth is an attractive young man who is a senior student at Salem House where David is sent during holidays as a punishment for having bitten Mr. Murdstone. He is afraid that the boys, particularly Steerforth, will ridicule him when they come back. He is taken before Steerforth as if he is a judge, and is treated with kindness. David is greatly impressed and Steerforth takes advantage of this to get hold of David's money and spend it on entertaining the boys. Though poor David loses whatever little money he had, he is grateful to Steerforth and looks up to him as his hero. Steerforth is friendly, gay and has amiable manners, but is selfish and unscrupulous. He actually comes from a rich family and does not care for the feelings of poor people, eg. Mr. Mell. Since he is David's friend, he is invited by Ham and Peggotty to visit them at Yarmouth. There he meets Emily, who is sweet and innocent, and wants to become a lady. He seduces her and elopes with her but does not intend to marry her. Steerforth is also responsible for the tragedy of Rosa Dartle. David cannot see the reality of Steerforth when he is a child, and sees through him when it is too late. Steerforth dies a death he deserves when he is drowned near Yarmouth, the very place he has wronged. Ham, whose future he has destroyed, tries to rescue him, but is also drowned.

4.2.2 The women characters

Dora Copperfield is the daughter of Mr. Spenlow of Doctors Commons. She is beautiful and good-natured, but empty-headed and impractical. She charms David from the moment he sees her, but he realises that everyone treats her like a child, and that she cannot act responsibly. Her mother died when she was a child, and therefore she did not have the guidance and correcting influence that could have made her a better person. Her rich father dotes on her, and she is surrounded by servants who cater to her every need. This is why she is immature, cannot fulfill any domestic duties, and is called his child wife by David. Their married life is rather chaotic because Dora does not know how to manage household affairs. Their servant is irregular, irresponsible and in the habit of stealing things. When David advises

her to supervise the work, she thinks that he is finding fault with her. He realises that she is not only unaware of the realities of the world, but is also incapable of learning them, and if he wants to be happy, he must accept her as she is. Dora herself is quite conscious that she is no better than a child, and during her illness realises that she has been a poor wife to David. She has great admiration for Agnes, who is an excellent housekeeper and wishes she had learnt from her about the art of housekeeping.

Miss Betsey Trotwood is David's great aunt, and is a victim of an unhappy marriage. Severely disappointed and disillusioned by her husband, she is strong minded, independent and self-reliant. After their legal separation and his subsequent death ten years later in India, she has taken her maiden name again and settled down in a cottage on the sea-coast at Dover. She lives here with one servant, Mr. Dick, a middle-aged man of queer habits. She does not approve of her nephew's marriage to David's mother, and is further disappointed when David is born because he is not a girl. After his mother's death, when David is ill-treated by his stepfather and comes to seek shelter with Miss Betsey, she is at first shocked at his shabby appearance, but reveals her kind nature when she tries to make him comfortable. When she decides to adopt him, she calls Mr. and Miss Murdstone, scolds them for having ill-treated David and his mother, and turns them out of her house. She arranges for his education, and later his stay with Mr. Wickfield. She gives him money to visit Peggotty, sends him on a trip abroad, and pays a large amount to get him articled to Spenlow and Jorkins. She tells him never to be false or cruel, which he always remembers. On being convinced that David really loves Dora, she helps him to win her love, and also helps Dora in her household affairs. David's marriage to Agnes makes her very happy because she has great admiration for her. She helps the Micawbers to emigrate to Australia because she has great sympathy for them. Above all, she displays tremendous courage when she loses her fortune. Though she has become eccentric due to the ill treatment she received at the hands of her husband, David's love restores her to normalcy.

Agnes Wickfield is Dickens's idea of idealised womanhood. She is not only beautiful and attractive, but also modest and self-effacing, and is a devoted daughter, a faithful friend and a loving wife. She is

always willing to sacrifice for others. When her mother dies, she leaves school to look after her father, and though she is in love with David, she suppresses her love when she comes to know that David has fallen in love with Dora. She even helps Dora with household work and takes care of her during her illness. Though at her deathbed Dora expresses the wish that Agnes should take her place in David's life, Agnes does not immediately disclose this to him, but tells him to go abroad and find solace in nature. She reveals Dora's wish to him only at the appropriate time, when David realises that he loves her and wants to marry her.

Mrs. Clara Copperfield is David's mother, a gentle and beautiful lady who is widowed six months before he is born. Miss Betsey, her only relative, leaves her because the newborn child is not a girl, and she is left with only the servant, Clara Peggotty for company. She then makes the mistake of marrying Mr. Murdstone, a cruel and heartless man, and is so completely dominated by him and her sister-in-law, that she becomes deeply unhappy. She does not have the courage to protest against the indignities heaped on her or their cruelty to David and dies when he is hardly eight.

4.2 Check Your Progress.

Match the following :-

Dora	ideal woman
Uriah Heep	eccentric
Miss Betsey	immature
Agnes	cunning

4.3 The structure of David Copperfield

The structure of David Copperfield, determined by its autobiographical form, is a simple one. So it is the story of a part of his life as he recalls it, beginning from his birth, and continues until the moment of his writing. David's presence and the events in his life give the novel coherence. Hence it is his story that is central to the novel and can be divided into three main parts. The first part (Chapters 1 to 18) consists of an account of the circumstances of his birth, childhood and early youth. In the first two chapters he tells us about his birth and early impressions of his time with his mother and Peggotty. The next

few chapters tell us about his misery after his mother marries Mr. Murdstone, her death and his misery thereafter. He then tells us about his experience at Murdstone and Grinby's, his stay with the Micawbers, his going to Miss Betsey and education at Dr. Strong's school. The second part (Chapters 19 to 53) is about his later youth and early manhood, when he looks for a career, his courtship and marriage to Dora and her death. The third part (Chapters 54 to 64), which tells about his mourning for Dora and ends with his marriage to Agnes. Each of the parts ends with a 'Retrospect' chapter that summarises the events taking place over a long period of time. There are two other sub-plots which are woven around David's story. One concerns Mr. Wickfield, Uriah Heep and Mr. Micawber. The second one is about the Peggotty family, Emily and Steerforth. The two stories balance one another. The Heep story has a happy ending, because Mr. Wickfield recovers, Heep is exposed and defeated, and everyone's fortune is restored. Steerforth's story ends tragically, because though Mr. Peggotty recovers Emily, Steerforth and Ham are drowned. There are other smaller stories like the story of Miss Betsey and her husband, of the Strong family, and of the Micawber family, and David is in some way connected with the characters in each story.

4.3 Check Your Progress.

Write 3 or 4 sentences on the structure of David Copperfield.

4.4 Humour and pathos in David Copperfield

There is humour in abundance in David Copperfield, and this is humour of character, humour of situation, as well as humour of dialogue. Critics have often compared Mr. Micawber to Shakespeare's Falstaff. His stout figure, shiny bald head, and above all his hope that something will turn up, are all a source of amusement. One moment he wants to slash his throat to kill himself, and is humming a tune the next. Miss Betsey creates humour because she is always seen

chasing donkeys and is constantly afraid of fire in London. Others like Mr. Dick, Barkis, or Mr. Spewlow, also create humour through their eccentricities. Many episodes in the novel are also a source of amusement. eg. when David is cheated by the waiter, or when Barkis indicates his wish to marry Peggotty. Dialogues become a source of humour in the novel because as usual, Dickens has given his comic characters a distinct manner of speech. eg., Mr. Micawber's grandiloquent speeches, or Miss Betsey's abrupt way of talking.

Dickens has often been criticised for being melodramatic and over sentimental. Some incidents in David Copperfield are genuinely pathetic eg. David's ill-treatment by the Murdstones, the death of his mother, or his suffering at the blacking factory. But this effect is spoilt by other scenes which are melodramatic and overdo the pathos. eg. the death of Dora's dog Jip when she dies, the death of Ham, or Steerforth's body being washed to the shore to lie at David's feet. Undoubtedly, such incidents detract from the effect of those where Dickens depicts true emotions with restraint and simplicity.

4.4 Check Your Progress.

Fill in the blanks :-

- a) Dickens creates humour through _____, _____, and _____
- b) Three humorous characters in David Copperfield are _____, _____ and _____.

4.5 The unity of David Copperfield

Some critics have commented that David Copperfield lacks unity. We have seen earlier that it is a carefully constructed novel in which the main plot and the sub-plots are arranged to form a well-organised whole. So it would not be correct to say that parts of the novel have nothing to do with the main story of David's life. eg. the stories of Miss Betsey and her husband, or of Doctor and Annie Strong. But David learns from both about the meaning of true love and what makes a happy marriage. Hence, if love and marriage are regarded as important themes in the novel, then the unity of the novel is clearly seen. Another fact which contributes to the unity of the novel is the autobiographical element and the first person narration. The novel is the story of David's life, his development and progress from birth to the

present, and this also contributes in making the novel an integrated whole.

4.6 Conclusion

While reading David Copperfield, one has to keep in mind that it was written almost midway in his literary career, and shows the ease of his early work as well as the sense of design of his later writing. The autobiographical narrative gave the advantages of allowing the story to stretch over a long period with David as the common link between the episodes and the characters, as well as for better development of characters. There is also a greater sense of realism since many of the incidents have been taken from his own life. eg. his suffering at the blacking factory, his infatuation with Dora, etc. Like many novels of this period, this one was also first published in serial form. So he had to keep the reader's interest alive, remind him about earlier episodes and characters, and at the same time overcome these problems with a carefully constructed story.

In the next chapter, we have to study George Eliot's Middlemarch , which was also written during the Victorian period and was also first published in serial form. In spite of this, it is, as we shall see, quite different from Dickens's novel.

4.7 Summary

In the beginning, we come to know about Dickens and his background. Then We come to know about the main characters and the unique way in which Dickens depicts them. We also find a brief analysis of the structure of the novel, as also Dickens's method of depicting humour and pathos. The question of whether the novel has unity of form is also touched upon.

Check Your Progress - Answers

4.2	Uriah Heep	cunning
	Dora	immature
	Miss Betsey	eccentric
	Agnes	ideal woman

4.3

The story of David is central to the structure of the novel and is also the factor that gives it coherence. There are two other sub-plots woven around the main plot. One concerns Mr. Wickfield, Uriah Heep and Mr. Micawber. The second is about the Peggotty family, Emily and Steerforth.

4.4

- a) Dickens creates humour through character, situation and dialogue.
- b) Three humorous characters in David Copperfield are Mr. Micawber, Miss Betsey and Mr. Dick.

Field Work :

Read the novel Great Expectations by Charles Dickens.



This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.