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Boys and Girls in Dickens's Novels

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to analyse the role of some characters in Dickens's production, lingering in particular on the figure of the child throughout the novels and how infancy and growth became central themes.

Following Coveney's assumption, according to which: "To write of the child in Dickens is not only to survey Victorian childhood; it is to write of Dickens himself, both as man and artist",¹ my study starts with a chapter dedicated to the roots of childhood as a literature theme; one of the first pioneer of the genre was, in fact, William Blake, influenced by the theories of Rousseau about infancy and proper education. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge contributed to add other perspectives to the theme, which included the relevance of imagination and creativity. During the nineteenth century the social aspect began to be associated to the children's world: the social aspect. As a matter of fact, the harsh social condition, especially for children, contributed to establish an image of poverty and injustice; moreover the young survivors of the big industrial cities, as London was, turned to be the protagonists of a genre which lies at the heart of Dickens's interests.

At this point of the study, Dickens's life becomes a fundamental element, since it encloses many episodes and sparks which are truly part of his novels. Especially his personal juvenile experiences became a solid model for his little protagonists, obliged to live an infancy of privations, both of their parents, and of their light heartedness. What is therefore analyzed is the relationship between the ideas of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and those of the writer Dickens. They both pointed at a specific phase of everyone's life – the infancy – when the spirit and the mind of a human being is uncorrupted, sincere and pure. These good qualities are destined to be threatened by social restrictions and moral rules, the child, therefore finds himself in an environment which is unsuitable for him, Dickens's children have often problems of isolation, shame and delusions. Every little step of a child's corruption is condemned

¹ P. Coveney, *The Image of Childhood: the Individual and Society: a Study of the Theme in English Literature*. Harmondsworth, Penguin. 1967. p.111

by Dickens, who portrays boys and girls who live the first period of their existences, oppressed by their anxious future expectations and adulthood challenges.

Boys are pictured as little orphans in a jungle of criminals, cruel relatives and mean friends. However, together with the bad characters, there is the presence of the good ones, who help the little hero to succeed in managing the trouble in his life.

Oliver Twist (1837-38) is the first boy examined in my study: an orphan obliged to live a miserable existence and, because of his innocence and ignorance he is unlucky enough to be involved in criminal deeds against his will. Anyway, he is finally portrayed as a honest and loyal boy, he remains uncorrupted throughout the novel, and succeed in maintain his infantile purity.

David Copperfield (1850) narrates the story of a boy from childhood to maturity, following the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. David will experience intense emotions and strong delusion because of others expectations about him, an idyllic idea of love and marriage and a blindness towards what is really necessary and important for him.

Both these characters will suffer the pain of the work at the warehouse, just as their creator who suffered a terrible period during his permanence in the blacking factory. This crucial experience seems to be impressed in Dickens's mind more that any others, he surely stressed this aspect by exploiting his little heroes in practicing that hard work.

Pip from *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) is another Dickensian child, already from the title the reader can foresee the development of the story: Pip has, in fact, great expectations waiting for him in London, the great City, but unfortunately, a series of misunderstandings and false illusions will destroy every belief and supposition. Pip is a boy who tends to be massively influenced by money and wealth, together with social respect and high status; however, in the end, he will realise that all his castles in the sky are nothing but evanescent clouds, and that only the true disinterested friendship and love, survive in eternity.

In Dickens's repertory, girls are often used to give a female perspective of the Victorian society and the condition of women in that period. Nell Trent, Kate Nickleby

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and Amy Dorrit are valid examples of what girls were in nineteenth century, although they are sometimes idealized or exaggerated; but Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield do really present a crucial difference: Dora is superficial, girlish and beautiful; Agnes is wise, serene and loyal. The two girls will gain David's heart but only the last one will result to be his true love. The girls have got natural childish attitudes but then they are obliged to mature and give their contribute to society by marrying a man. In this sense, Estella is a peculiar example of cruel girl who treats men as trophies to collect and destroy, only at the end she will understand her mistaken and errors by asking for Pip's forgiveness.

CHAPTER 1

CHILDHOOD IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

This first chapter will deal with the theme of childhood in English literature, during different epochs. The study will start from the Romantic period, when the child became subject of numerous poetries, essays and political debates; before the Romantic epoch, the children were seen as miniature adults, not much different from their mature parents. The French philosopher Jan-Jacques Rousseau was the first to recognize an own identity to the child. His characterization of the infants led to many discussion about the way children were usually raised and their development into adults. Furthermore, Rousseau compared the period of childhood to the concept of the “noble savage”: both these aspects show common characteristics, the man has a deep connection with nature and thus reveals his pure self.

The second part of the chapter will be dedicated to great Romantic poets who are considered the great pioneers of the theme: William Blake wrote a collection of poems called *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*; innocence means for him a period of protected ingenuity sometimes attacked by the real world and society, experience, on the contrary, is characterized by the loss of that naivety, due to social conventions and rigid behavioural schemes. William Wordsworth underlined the importance of childhood memories in adulthood, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge stressed the role of imagination as the main spring of creative ability, Nature plays a fundamental part children’s perception of the world.

In the third part I will describe the nineteenth century novel getting closer to the features of the social novels, and the role of the child in them, in particular I will consider the works of Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley. Finally the *Bildungsroman* is taken into consideration as a copious genre which gave rise to a host of novels and studies on childhood and children growth.

1.1 THE ROMANTIC CHILD

The figure of the Romantic Child has roots in the 'Cult of Sensibility', Barker-Benfield describes the phenomenon as

“a cult of feeling, a cult of melancholy, a cult of distress, a cult of refined emotionalism, a cult of benevolence, and cults of individual writers (Rousseau’s the most famous) and of some of their characters, a “Werther” cult. All may be grouped with the cult of sensibility”.²

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, this new sensibility became known in literature as 'Romanticism'³; the Romantic movement placed an emphasis on the emotional and introspective life of the author, underlining the importance of capturing the true voice of feeling, this brings to a shift of tendency from Reason (promoted by the Enlightenment) to Emotion which will distinguish the first part of the nineteenth century and gradually the predilection of the child as a literary theme.

Already from the seventeenth century, the intellectual acknowledgment and affirmation of Newton’s principles created a new frame of the world – a rational universe without tragic possibilities that tended towards a cosmic peace. However, this hoped peace was not destined to last - as Peter Coveney explains:

The wars, corruption, injustice, and brutality of eighteenth century Europe, suggested that the cosmic frame, orderly though it might be, contained a blurred and imperfect picture, [...] Order, Nature and Reason remained; but they now became the basis of Reason applied to human institution.⁴

A theory of education already existed in the seventeenth century: John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was a treatise on the education of gentlemen written in 1693 which became the most important work on education for over a century. Locke formulated a new theory according to which the gentleman’s mind is like a blank page that does not contain any inborn ideas. The treatise explains how to educate that

² J.G. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.XIX (Introduction)

³ Romanticism, or Romantic Age, had its most relevant period between 1800 to 1850. This era is important because it reconsidered the role of the child in family and society. The child needs to express himself as he really was: with his innocence, inexperience and happiness.

⁴ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 38

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pure spirit considering three aspects: the growth of a healthy body, the development of a high-principled character and the selection of a congruous academic curriculum.⁵ Anyhow, the 'rationalist' education hardly considered the child as a child: every step of his growth was seen through the point of view of an adult man. The child was often treated as a small already grown-up adult, he was disciplined without considering his childish necessities and attitudes by instructing him with the moral and rational schemes of the mature manhood.

Reason and scientific rigor became, in every field, the keystones during the early eighteenth century, until the faith in intellect began to vacillate and a new sensibility got a foothold – against this materialistic and rational order, the most relevant representatives are: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; as the eighteenth century moved on, in fact, the real nature of a man was not only based on his reason, but most of all on his instincts, feelings and emotions.

⁵ J. Locke, *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke: Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. by John W. Yolton, Jean S. Yolton, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

1.2 JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S NOBLE SAVAGE

Rousseau is considered the father of the well known concepts of the 'noble savage' and the 'man in the state of nature'. The voyages of the seventeenth century aroused the interest in savage and primitive cultures which became the topic of the satire to oppose the primordial virtues of the native human beings with the corruptions of humans living in society. Rousseau's great merit was to give expression to this new perspective and, in particular, to see the analogies between the time of childhood and the 'state of Nature' as periods closely comparable. For him the child was not a 'small adult', but a definite entity, provided with natural virtues that can be fruitfully developed only in the 'state of Nature', the only limit is society, which was considered a vehicle of corruption.

Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education*, is a treatise on the nature of education, we can understand clearly Rousseau's opinions already from the first opening lines: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man".⁶ Unlike Locke's work, Rousseau tries to describe a method and a system of education that enabled the child to become an adult in the domestic and civic life, but without forgetting the real pure essence of him:

Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we deliberately pervert this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavoured, and which soon decay [...]

We know nothing of childhood: and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray [...] They (the adults) are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man. True education is simply the development of the original nature of the child.⁷

The text is divided into five books: three of them are assigned to the child Emile, the fourth is an analysis of adolescence, and the fifth is about Sophie – the female correlative of Emile. As stated by Rousseau, every step of a child growth should be respected according to his nature: in infancy the baby should be stimulated and his instinct should be let free to work spontaneously; in childhood, the rational aspect

⁶ J. J. Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*. ed. by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1979, p. 37.

⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

should be animated only by actions and activities, never by words; in adolescence, moral and social discussions will be unavoidably displayed, but the method should be maintained until the boy is capable of recognizing his limits and achieve an equilibrium. Rousseau uses the novelistic device of a pupil and his tutor so that the work gives not only some advice on raising children, but it is also one of the first *Bildungsroman* novels, thirty years before Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.

Thomas Day (1748-1789), was one of the numerous followers of the teachings of Rousseau, he wrote a bestselling children's book, which was widely known by all nineteenth century children: *The History of Sanford and Merton*.⁸ The story, published in 1783, wanted to demonstrate how a wilful and undisciplined boy, could – if well and adequately trained – become an agreeable and pleasant adult. The book became a Victorian classic, and it was beyond any doubt inspired by Rousseau's thesis.

⁸ T. Day, *The History of Sanford and Merton* (1783–1789), Charleston, South Carolina: Nabu Press, 2012. Thomas Day was a British author, famous for his children's books which supported Rousseau's educational method.

1.3 WILLIAM BLAKE'S INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

William Blake's child was the symbol of innocence, a state of the soul connected with happiness, freedom and imagination. Blake stressed the importance of imagination over reason and he believed that ideas should be created not from the mere observation of nature but from inner visions. According to him, men live as slaves in the social system and they can liberate themselves only through the acquaintance of their original childish innocence – this primordial ability of catching 'Visions' was lost because of 'Experience', adults have lost their imaginative joy owing to philosophy, religion, and law. Blake also wrote two collections of short poems: *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) The first one deals with childhood, purity and nature, it was written just before the outbreak of the French Revolution; the second one appeared during the period of Terror in France and it is, in a sense, the antithesis of the previous collection: a more pessimistic view of life emerges where society had denied to everyone the expression of imaginative joy.

However the two spheres are not separated:

Innocence and Experience were the 'two Contrary States of the Human Soul'; and through 'contraries' for Blake arose 'progression'. The force of his Innocence is in fact charged with the intensity of his Experience.⁹

That means that Experience, identified with adulthood, coexists with and finalizes Innocence, producing a new point of view on reality. This ambiguity can be easily clarified by comparing two main poems of the collection. In *Infant Joy* the felicity of the child is happily celebrated:

I have no name:
I am but two days old".
What shall I call thee?
"I happy am,
Joy is my name".
Sweet joy befall thee!"

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee:

⁹ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 56

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Thou dost smile,
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.¹⁰

As it may be observed, the author gives a childlike quality to the language and the baby's lack of name keeps him free from social conditioning and, therefore, happy.

The 'opposite' poem is *Infant Sorrow*, from the collection *Songs of Experience*. Here the poet introduces the sphere of the sad consciousness of experience:

My mother groaned! My father wept,
Into the dangerous world I leapt,
Helpless, naked, piping loud,
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands,
Bound and weary, I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.¹¹

This is not of course a conventional image of infancy, the baby is just a miserable creature disliked by his own parents and conscious of his experience in the harsh world. It is as if the baby was born in a time and space that did not want him, in an existence that is mournful already from the very beginning, a life which will be really sorrowful for the poor child.

Everything considered, life in the late eighteenth century should not have been so easy: Blake's himself was concerned with the political and social problems of the time, he shared the egalitarian principles of the French revolution, supported the abolition of slavery and felt compassion for the victims of the industrial revolution: especially children and orphans. His contribution can be read in his 'social poems': *Holy Thursday* and *The Chimney Sweeper*.

Holy Thursday reports the celebrations in St Paul's Cathedral; Blake observes the little charity-school orphans while they sing:

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocence faces clean,
The children walking two and two, in red and blue and green [...]

O what a multitude they seem'd, these little flowers of London town!
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.

¹⁰ W. Blake, *Infant Joy* from 'Songs of Innocence' 1789.

¹¹ W. Blake, *Infant Sorrow* from 'Songs of Experience' 1794.

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The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands.¹²

The children are like flowers in a city, this comparison emphasizes their beauty and fragility in contrast with the harsh and gloomy urban life; they, and their little hands, are described as lambs in their innocence and meekness. The public display of love and charity conceals the cruelty to which impoverished children were often subjected.

In *The Chimney Sweeper* Blake displays the misery of many boys obliged to work in miserable and desolated conditions in the hard world of the exploitation in London child labour. But here the child dominates and overcomes the squalor of his earthly situation, by knowing that he will be saved by God and His angel from his material agony.

And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a god boy,
He'd have God for his Father, and never want joy.
And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,
And go with our bags and our brushes to work.¹³

Even if with the *Songs of Experience* we enter in the urban, gloomy and heartless world of the city, the concrete and palpable visions of Blake are as bright as ever; experience can be traced along the streets of the slums, the indignation, the anxiety and concern of the author is perceivable. In the last collection the child is the theme of only half of the poems, because Blake associates the progress of adulthood with experience. The antithesis between innocence and experience can be "solved" through Love:

Love was the state of grace into which the child should continuously grow; an extension of the universal compassion which the child enjoys in his innocence; the fulfilment and continuity, in fact, of that innocence.¹⁴

As Peter Coveney reports, for Blake the childish innocence is presumably continuous, and it has been corrupted only by social impediments which frustrated the delight of that virtue.

In *The Little Girl Lost* and in *The Little Girl Found*, Blake expresses what love and passion should be for a child. They are, in fact, two accounts of innocent passion limited and prevented by parents and society. In the first poem Lyca's parents are

¹² W. Blake, *Holy Thursday* from 'Songs of Experience' 1794.

¹³ W. Blake, *The Chimney Sweeper* from 'Songs of Experience', 1794.

¹⁴ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

searching for her in a 'desert wild' and in the end we discover that the innocent child is taken from her earthly suffering by death and she is given comfort and rest for eternity by a lioness. Her parents, dedicated to find their lost daughter, are similarly rewarded in the second poem – when they finally found her – because they come into contact with the lioness which reassures them. But then this reconciliation, this fearless acceptance of sexual love is not found in *A Little Girl Lost*; its pessimistic intention is clear:

Children of the future age
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time
Love, Sweet Love, was thought a crime.¹⁵

Blake's indignation is evident; moreover it continues in his 'battle' against religion and clerical intolerance. The institution of marriage, to Blake's mind a tool of organized religion, is a societal construct and therefore an impediment to true human nature. The innocent, natural love of the two young people is the real Love, but her parents, trapped as they are in their archaic conservatism, cannot accept this truth.

Another similar denounce can be seen in *The Boy Lost* and *The Little Boy Found*. Similarly to the previous 'female' poems, these two represent the human soul in the form of a boy who is lost and desperate asking for help. At first the boy cries out to his earthly father, but he is left behind, as the church, philosophies and institutions do in the real world letting people more lost than ever. It is only in the second poem, thanks to the presence of God that the boy returns to a state of safety, and his soul is protected in the arms of his mother, who represents here a positive figure.

At last it is inevitable to linger on the poem *The Schoolboy*; here Blake declares his aversion against education, moreover it can be read as if the "I" were Blake himself.

I love to rise in a summer morn
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the sky-lark sings with me.
O! what sweet company!

But go to school in a summer morn,
O! it drives all joy away;

¹⁵ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 62.

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Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day
In sighing and dismay
[...]
How can the bird that is born for joy
Sit in a cage and sing [...]

O! father and mother, if buds are nipp'd
And blossoms blow away [...]
How shall the summer arise in joy,
Or the summer fruits appear.¹⁶

The happiness of the boy completely disappears in the moment he realizes that he has to go to school closed in a room instead of enjoying the summer outside in the nature. According to Coveney, the final rhetorical questions can be elucidated in this way: “ ‘The bird that is born for joy’ is the child of Blake’s Songs of Experience; his ‘cage’ the late eighteenth-century England of the Songs of Experience”.¹⁷

¹⁶ W. Blake, *The Schoolboy* from ‘Songs of Experience’, 1794.

¹⁷ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

1.4 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the man,
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.¹⁸

This poem is probably the best one that can show us how William Wordsworth approached to childhood. The simple idea of the sight of a rainbow creates a visual experience which is remembered through years. The 'natural piety' that links the poet's days, is the imaginative attitude of the child and represents the feeling of wonder and joy. Wordsworth saw the development of the human spirit as a voyage from infancy to youth to maturity, that is the meaning of "The child is the father of the man" and the Nature is a fundamental background in the rehearsal of this process. As in Blake's theory, the child acquires wisdom with experiences: man does not exist outside the natural world, but as an active participant in it. Wordsworth was markedly influenced by the philosopher David Hartley (1705-1757) who believed that our moral character evolved during childhood as a result of pleasant or painful experiences. Wordsworth used in *The Prelude* these words:

There are in our existence spots of time
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue.¹⁹

The concept of the spots of time as the key moments of our imagination has been intensely analyzed. According to Jonathan Bishops:

It is interesting that the "spots" which Wordsworth chooses to illustrate his general theory of the restorative value of childhood memories should be the one which most directly concern family feelings, and that in both the weight of emotion shifts from the human occasion to associated images.²⁰

¹⁸ W. Wordsworth, *My heart leaps up*, from *Poems in two Volumes*, 1802.

¹⁹ W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* XII, lines 208-210, ed De Selincourt (1850), Oxford, 1926.

²⁰ J. Bishops, *Wordsworth and the "Spots of Time"*, in *ELH* Vol.26, No.1, 1959, (pp.45-65) p.58.

In the light of the analysis of Jerome Buckley,

The deepest strength stems from flashes of sudden insight, "spots of time", scattered throughout existence but most frequent and compelling in unself-conscious childhood. [...] So described and interpreted, the "spots of time" acquire a religious significance; each is a true "epiphany", a warranty of the soul's belonging to a larger life.²¹

Since the experiences collected by Wordsworth are private and not impersonal, they can disclose the importance of common life's aspects, but are different from one man to another:

He [Wordsworth] does not feel, as the mystic traditionally does, an unqualified joy, nor are claims made of insight into a supernatural reality; the claims that are made are imaginative and emotional.²²

Wordsworth lost his mother when he was very young and he lived the rest of his childhood with austere and unhelpful grandparents; at the time of the French Revolution he shared democratic ideals with enthusiasm, but inevitably the disillusionment of the war had on him a heavy effect. That experience developed in him a profound sensibility which made him grow intellectually. With *The Prelude* and *Lines Written above Tintern Abbey* (1798) Wordsworth investigates on how the spirit can grow better in an environment of harmony and balance. In *Tintern Abbey* the natural setting plays a fundamental role since it is a junction between two entities of the poet himself – one of the present and one of the past. Everything is connected through memories, "[...] when like a roe / I bounded o'er the mountains [...] for the Nature then to me was all in all".²³

In 1804 Wordsworth composed the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. As Coveney reports, Wordsworth wrote in the *Fenwick notes*:

The visionary qualities of children have often been noted, and have been interpreted as intimations of immortality: I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet.²⁴

²¹ J. Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, Baker and Taylor, 2000, p. 4-5.

²² J. Bishops, *op.cit.*, p.58.

²³ W. Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, lines 68-75, 1798.

²⁴ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

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The first stanza of the Ode, in the best Wordsworthian style, brings us directly into his childhood memories:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream. [ll. 1-5]

The poem makes explicit the author's belief that life on earth is a feeble shadow of a previous pure existence, this early life is already confused and imperceptible in childhood and then it has been forgotten in the process of growing up.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! [ll. 59-67]

Even though we have forgotten our antecedent entity, joy and natural instinct are still present but latent inside us:

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction

High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake. [ll. 134-160]

The turning point lies in the tenth stanza, when the poet affirms his decisive statement about the maturity and what we could gain from it:

We will grieve not, rather find

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Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind. [ll. 184-191]²⁵

The Ode is Wordsworth's great statement about the action of childhood memories of nature upon the adult mind, the 'philosophic mind' permits men to understand nature in depth. The action of searching the natural voice inside us is the remedy for the mature grief. The mind of adulthood combined with the memory of childhood enables the poet to bear the loss of children's spontaneous enthusiasm in nature, and he succeed in making a vital and progressive movement, without losing himself in the earthly world.

²⁵ W. Wordsworth, *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, from 'Poems in two Volumes', 1807.

1.5 SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S IMAGINATION

Like Blake and Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge stressed the role of imagination, considering it the supreme faculty of the creative power. He distinguished between the 'Primary Imagination' as the perception of images, and the 'Secondary imagination' as the poetic faculty which can create, compose and destroy. Coleridge and Wordsworth formed a close friendship, due also to their common intellectual interests and their concern in establishing a philosophy of the man's knowledge. According to Coleridge, the most important feature in a child was his imaginative, intuitive quality of the soul, and that must be preserved: the primitive instinct should be maintained until adulthood – here the feelings are similar to Wordsworth's ones: freshness, spontaneity, wonder, joy in existence, a sense of novelty in something familiar and common. His disposition towards children is more comprehensible in the description of the poet's son Hartley, made by Coleridge himself – Coveney in his book relates:

Hartley is a spirit that dances on an aspen leaf – the air that yonder fallow-faced and yawning tourist is breathing is to my babe a perpetual nitrous oxide [...] I look at my doted-on Hartley – he moves, he lives, he finds impulses from within and without [...] he looks at the clouds and mountains, and vaults and jubilates [...] Hartley whirling round for joy, Derwent eddying, shouting his little hymn of joy.²⁶

Coleridge was firmly convinced that Nature was a key element in the activity of imagination, in his poem *Frost at Midnight*, he emphasizes the function of nature as comforter and as chest of memories. At first Coleridge is alone in nature and remembers his loneliness and isolation during his childhood:

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness.²⁷

²⁶P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 87.

²⁷S. T. Coleridge, *Frost at Midnight*, 1798, ll. 4-10

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Then he speaks directly to his son, Hartley, wishing him a better life than his own:

For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags 55
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags.²⁸

In the end the poet concludes his dedication with a message of hope for his child:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night that
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.²⁹

It is significant that every step of the poem is characterized by the presence of nature as a benevolent element where a child can cultivate his imagination.

While Wordsworth was raised in the countryside of the Cumberland, and saw his own childhood at the highest point of the connection between him and the nature, Coleridge spent his infancy in London and he “saw nought lovely but the sky and stars” experiencing the lingering effect of an alienation from nature. It is the pain of this alienation that enforces Coleridge’s hope that his son Hartley could live a life connected with nature. For Coleridge, education is the enhancement of children’s feelings, emotions and natural excitement, only through this preservation, the future man would possess reason together with imagination.

²⁸ Ibid., ll. 51-58

²⁹ Ibid., ll. 65-74

1.6 THE SOCIAL NOVEL: THE CHILD IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the early nineteenth century the figure of the child became one of the poetic symbols of the Romantic movement, but it was not before the 1830s, and more especially in the 1840s and 1850s, that the child found another mean of expression in the novel. As Peter Coveney asserts:

It was not only a revolution within the novel itself, however; but a revolution as between poetry and prose. The energies revitalizing literature at the close of the eighteenth century had been directed into poetry. At some point in the main flow of literary feeling, those energies were deflected into the novel.³⁰

With the great establishment of the Victorian novel, poetry found itself enfeebled, and its domain became more and more marginal. According to some critics, Wordsworth's *Prelude* was the last exercise of the English poetic sensitivity; however the movement towards the novel carried, of course, with itself some Romantic characteristics, also because many Victorian writers took inspiration from the former style: self-consciousness, the social protest, the intensified personality of an individual, and, above all, the developed awareness of the child.

By telling the life of a child following the Romantic ideas above mentioned, the author could provide a series of glints concerning the social situation, the imagination and the innocence which are destroyed during the growth, the nostalgia of the past times, anxieties, fears, material and pecuniary uncertainty and introspective commiseration.

Charles Dickens's achievement lies in the sum of those themes, and the use of them across three decades; he became therefore, the focus for any studies about the 'creation' of the child in the nineteenth-century novel. What was more argued in the literature of the child of this period, was the condition of children in society. The romantic idea of a frail and innocent child was elaborated in the victimization of him, thus a tension between the childish innocence and the adult's experience became a sort of *leitmotif* in the Victorian child literature. With *Oliver Twist* as a pioneer, Dickens

³⁰ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

represented his anxieties towards the indifference of an age that was greatly unaware of the miserable conditions of its children; he moreover inspired other similar protests, such as Charlotte Elizabeth's *Helen Fleetwood* and Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy*, which continued the theme of the vulnerable orphan.

The roots of the main stream of the social novel can be detected also in the works of Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley. They represent the literary consciousness of the Victorian age, sowing the seeds for Dickens's *Bleak House* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* among others.

1.6.1 EVIDENCES OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The political awareness is well combined with the characters and the plot; the condition of the industrial England became a mirror for the condition of the English industrial child. The first novel I shall to analyse is *Sybil* by Benjamin Disraeli, known as British Prime Minister – bonded to the Queen Victoria by a strong friendship – but remarkable also as a novelist. His work was inspired by the Report of the Commission on the Employment of Young Persons and Children of 1842, a collection of depositions and evidences of the terrible working conditions of children. Here some examples gathered by Robert Hugh Franks, one of the Sub-Commissioners for the South Wales, designated to collect testimonies among children in Collieries and Ironworks:

No.13. Catherine Hughes, 14 years old, water carrier.

I carry water on the hill to the men who char the coal for the blast furnaces. I work seven days and seven nights with less work on Sundays, 12 to 13 hours on other periods. He works for his step father as his own is dead. Cannot read yet but goes to Sunday School to hear the preacher and see about. [Does not know how to read.] No questions in the Catechism are taught at school. God made me, Jesus is God, Adam was the first man, Job was the wisest man. Twelve pennies in a shilling, five fingers on each hand, six days in a week. Cannot say how many months in a year. A month contains more days than a week.

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No.37. Sarah Griffith, 14 years old, wheels iron.

I wheel bar iron to the men and have done so for 12 months and work 12 hours. I was at home before and made the bread and knitted stockings. I never was at school but the Sunday Welsh School where I learned to read the Welsh language. [Reads Welsh very well.] St. Paul wrote the Epistles. There are three persons in the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. [Repeats the Commandments.] Never was at writing. Cannot play after work as I have to assist in the house cleaning. Father is very ill, consumptive. One little brother at work. I earn 20s. a month, brother 14s. Brother does not yet read.

No.43. Phillip Phillips, 9 years old, air-door keeper.

He began work at seven years old and has often fallen asleep when tired. He runs home and gets bread and cheese. He was burned by the firedamp nine months since and laid by five months, expected to die. When the accident took place some men were in the mine and one had gone into the old works. The men were first burned. I was carried home by a man. The fire hurt me very badly, it took the skin from my face. I have returned to work three months. My father is a carpenter, mother has eight children, three out of work. I was never at school and none of the children go to school. [Face quite disfigured.]³¹

The education and the knowledge of these children and of many others were clearly very low, bad and uncertain – according to the statements they cannot read or write, or can do that very badly. They are exploited at work and have just some basics about what religion, God, good and evil were. In 1843 and 1844 Disraeli travelled broadly throughout the nation especially in the industrial areas to collect the information he needed to create his work, therefore *Sybil* of the 1845 must be read accordingly to this social background.

³¹ All testimonies were found in R.H.Franks's Report on the *Employment of Children and Young Persons in the Collieries and the Iron-Works of South Wales, the district of Merthyr Tydvil, the collieries of Monmouthshire, Glamorganshire and Pembrokeshire and on the State, Condition and Treatment of such Children and Young Persons, 1842.* ed. by Ian Winstanley, Picks Publishing, Lancashire, 1999.

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Sybil, or The Two Nations, traces the circumstances of the working classes of England. It is set in Mowbray, an industrial town where children are employed in factories in awful conditions. The plot underlined the extreme different habits and lifestyle between rich and poor. As the title suggests, the wealthy and rich landowners enjoyed excesses, while the poor working class live in squalid conditions. Since the novel is a *roman à these* – a didactic novel which puts forward an argument over some political or moral problems – it describes the destruction of the labouring classes and the attempt to obtain rights by creating clamour for the working class conditions. Disraeli's interest in this subject sprang from his interest in the Chartist movement: it was a working-class political reformist movement that was summed up by Thomas Carlyle with his 1839 essay "Chartism", the movement demanded social reforms and the extension of the right to vote.

In 1848 Mrs Gaskell took the same England to start her first novel *Mary Barton*. But, as Coveney noticed: " With Disraeli's *Sybil* we had a sequence of ideas, and the factual evidence to substantiate them. With *Mary Barton* the interest lies in the misery of the victims of an uncharitable and therefore immoral society".³² The focus shifts from the social immorality to the agony of the victims. Mrs Gaskell does not draw political conclusions, but promotes charity towards the poor and the sufferings. The plot is set in Manchester where John Barton, Mary's father, lives with his family; at first the times are good, but after the death of his wife and son, he falls into depression, he embitters his social complaint and eventually involves himself in the Chartist movement. It is as if the author herself tries to fight against disease, starvation and death:

For Mrs Gaskell the forlorn children of *Mary Barton* are the pathetic victims of a society in which the feelings of common human brotherhood are denied. Her complaint was not economic; it was not the inefficiency of *laissez aller* capitalist society which roused her anger; but the setting of selfish gain above the common good, especially when times were bad.³³

She encouraged generosity and the sharing of the pain, the rich people should help the poor ones, she wanted the reader to feel solidarity with the destitutes. Six years later

³² P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

she wrote *North and South*, and as the title foreshadows, she portrayed the lives of the social strata in the Victorian Manchester, stressing again the isolation of the poor and the ignorance of the rich in front of the social problem. With Disraeli the child was an element of political and social analysis, with Mrs Gaskell the victimized infant was an instrument to shake the morality and the conscience of the wealthy people, ultimately in Kingsley the child is the direct protagonist of his history.

Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* was written in 1850, the same year as Dickens's *David Copperfield* and three years after Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as in those books, Kingsley's novel centred the interest in a child and his later development towards the terrible working conditions and the austere Puritan morality. It is a fictitious autobiography of a boy who becomes a Chartist after a life of social injustices and bitter experiences. As Disraeli, Kingsley wrote against the background of a real situation – in this case a cholera epidemic in Bermondsey. He visited the infirm people, he made interviews and tried to report all of it to the Bishop in Oxford, modelling his novel into a social tract. The figure of the child plays a fundamental role and many situations are described from a child's point of view. When Alton dreams about far lands while he is confined in the urban limits, he is characterized by a vivid imagination which puts him in contact with the former romantic tradition:

There is a sure echo of Wordsworth and Coleridge in the image of the child deprived of joy and wonder in his urban prison; the tension between urban restraint and the child's wonder and delight in Nature is essentially of the Romantics.³⁴

There is a fusion between the romantic tradition and the Christian compassion for human beings and childhood innocence. After the initial declaration of Alton's innocence, Kingsley proceeds in telling the experiences which brought him to join the Chartist movement. The child is overwhelmed by the horror of the working conditions, as David Copperfield was, and this will deeply influence its future: the boy grows with a sense of desolation and denial. In spite of his great ambitions and expectations, Locke struggles in vain until he reached the Chartist solution out of the gloominess of Puritanism.

³⁴ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 102.

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The sympathy towards the protagonist promoted by Gaskell and the choice of the autobiographical narration of Kingsley increased the impression of vivid reality. Most of the times the sad experience of the protagonist's childhood contribute to create the effect of empathy towards him or her.

In order to explain this concept better I will refer to the novel *Jane Eyre*, where the heroine is at first established as the victim, lonely and isolated, then she reacts against the conventions of society, becoming a free and independent woman. The victimized characterization persists throughout the novel, even when she becomes adult and her torments seem to continue to persecute her. It is as if Jane is continuing to live her childhood inside a world of denial, feeling an eternal sense of inferiority. The childish view of life become a grotesque, enormous, and unpredictable world where she is always the "wrong one". That obviously impresses her, her future and strengthens the pity towards her, so that the reader himself feels pity towards the poor Jane and her misfortunes:

Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one's favour? [...] I dared commit no fault: I strove to fulfil every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night.³⁵

Even Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* denounces the precarious life of a child within a hostile environment. The girls at Lowood school are bereaved of infancy and childhood, they are almost slaves intended to die early of illness due to the awful conditions of the institute. The social novel is a statement of cruel atrocities and female discrimination of the nineteenth century, it denounces the rigid education and the brutal practices of the schooling system.

³⁵ C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Indo-European Publishing, 2012, p.7

1.7 THE MAKING OF A GENTLEMAN

In the long wake of Wordsworth and Coleridge, 'Education' as a theme of literature became established in the nineteenth century and gave life to a rich and various production. Nonetheless, the roots of the nineteenth century novel of education are German: Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, published in 1794-96, is the model of the so called *Bildungsroman* – the formation novel or the novel of youth – that gave birth and influenced great part of this genre. Goethe's aim was to narrate the *Sendung* or Mission of the young protagonist, in particular his apprenticeship for his self-realization as an actor, professionally speaking, and as a man, spiritually speaking.

In German literature we can distinguish among three variations of the genre: the *Entwicklungsroman*, the general story of a young man's growth, the *Erziehungsroman*, with a prominence on the young's education and training, the *Künstlerroman*, specifically on the training of an artist. Often in the English literature these three categories are not rigidly separated, and the novel of youth is frequently a *Künstlerroman*. In the last years, the principal reference for the British novel of formation has been Jerome Hamilton Buckley's study. The author proposes an extensive classification and definition of the genre: according to Buckley, a *Bildungsroman* is a "convenient synonym for the novel of youth or apprenticeship"³⁶ that portrays a set list of characteristics, among them "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy".³⁷

In the first part of the book, Buckley lingers on some of the earliest examples of the genre: according to him, Walter Scott's *Waverley* represents the immediate influence of the Romantic period on the English novel of youth, but it is not a romantic story, on the contrary an ironic perspective of a young man's education, who without strong and decisive experiences cannot fully live his existence. The narration starts with a long dissertation on Waverley's family, his studies and early readings, then Scott

³⁶ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.18.

promises to “get as soon as possible into a more picturesque and romantic country”³⁸ bringing us into the universe of adventures of the young Waverley. Yet for Buckley, “his growth is little more than the vacillation his name suggests, and his maturity brings him a possible respite from bemused indecision but no real perspicacity or depth of insight”.³⁹

Buckley’s work contains analyses of numerous texts and examples ranging from Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Samuel Butler’s *The Way of all Flesh*, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* to Golding’s *Free Fall*. From all these books and many others Buckley extracts the principal characteristics and the general storyline of the English *Bildungsroman*:

A child of some sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts or flights of fancy, antagonistic to his ambitions, and quite impervious to the news ideas he has gained from unprescribed reading. His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating insofar as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city (in the English novels usually London) There his real “education” begins, not only his preparation for a career but also –and often more importantly – his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. [...] His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice.⁴⁰

Buckley’s description expresses so precisely and faithfully the pattern of the *Bildungsroman* that it seems already to recognise the plot of Dickens’s novels; the young David or Pip who leave their adolescence behind and find their maturity in London, even though the city is often a place of freedom and at the same time of corruption and disillusionment.

The privation of the beloved father or mother is usually associated to a decrease of faith in the values at home and brings the protagonist towards the search of a substitute parent and to grow found of a relative or a person who was crucial in the child’s early life. Most of the time this lack of a strong figure in the child’s infancy is

³⁸ W. Scott, *Waverley*, Digireads Publishing, Lawrence (KS), 2009, p.21

³⁹ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.9

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.17

the principal cause of the affirmation of the young's independence. Money are another central element in the hero's development: the young child often lives in poverty and he is always attracted by economic security and wealth. Nonetheless if he wants to make a remarkable achievement, the protagonist must be able to discern the value of money and the value of what is really important in his life, in order to complete his initiation and change his heart. Finally Buckley states that most novels of formation end with an open ending, uncertainty and a dubious final choice, for example: *Great Expectations*, *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Free Fall* ; and only few, like *David Copperfield* and *The Way of All Flesh*, finish with a recognizable happy ending.

The theme of the *Bildungsroman* has always been a delicate and discussed topic amongst numerous critics until nowadays. During the end of the twentieth century, for example, feminist critics started to discuss the male chauvinistic presuppositions of the novels of youth and the secondary literature of it. A significant contribution in this sense, is the anthology *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*.⁴¹ In the introduction, the editors show how Buckley's classification of the most relevant examples of *Bildungsroman*, avoids and excludes the contributions of the female experience in the genre. The example called into question is provided by *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot, where Buckley sees only the evolution of Tom Tulliver, and not the one of the central heroine Maggie. The study is enriched by two essays that present alternative models and canons of female formation until nowadays, recognizable in the works of Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys and Doris Lessing.

Other critics interpreted the novel of formation as a genre that links personal and historical progression. A 1986 study by Mikhail Bakhtin's argues that the *Bildungsroman* deals with "the image of man in the process of becoming"⁴² and imagines the central character over the limits of historical periods:

The hero emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him

⁴¹ S. Rosowski, *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. by E. Abel, M. Hirsch and E. Langland, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983, pp. 49-68.

⁴² M. Bakhtin, *The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, p.19.

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and through him [...] it is as though the very foundations of the world are changing, and man must change along with them.⁴³

According to this statement, individuals must necessarily develop and grow; this happens also for history, because past, present and future should be, and are, linked by a process of evolution. Therefore the two spheres, the individual and history, are not independent from one another, as the growth of a person is unavoidably influenced by the social and historical events of his period. However, themes and techniques of the *Bildungsroman* continue to stimulate the interest of contemporary critics and readers, demonstrating the widespread magnetism and persisting significance of the genre.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.

CHAPTER 2

CHARLES DICKENS

In his essay *Dickens on Children and Childhood*, Angus Wilson identifies three sources of Dickens's concern in his works:

They are: - the pressure of his obsessions with certain incidents in his own childhood; - his attempt to resolve the metaphysical debate concerning the meaning and value of childhood that he inherited from the previous century, [...] and his concern with the social exploitation of children as the most immediately horrible feature of a callous society.⁴⁴

In this chapter I shall present Charles Dickens and the role of the child in some his works. Dickens chose the serialized novel as a form of publication: this was certainly a big issue; he had to consider the structure of the plot very carefully, thinking simultaneously of the needs of his serial readers and of those who would eventually read the book in volume form. The serialized novel consisted in the development of a serial fiction as part of weekly or monthly magazines, which might contain material by other authors as well. Everything considered, the monthly publication has revealed itself as a suitable expression of the numerous occurrences and adventures of a child whose growth has been displayed step by step in front of the reader's eyes.

Surely Dickens's infancy influenced his writings and stories, moreover, he was earnestly concerned about the historical situation in the matter of the child's life during the Industrial Revolution, his education and most of all his becoming an adult.

Dickens's belief in the natural goodness and purity of a child probably derived from the ideas of the previous century and most of all by Jean-Jacques Rousseau; in the following paragraphs I shall start by tracing some concepts in the theory of Rousseau, in order to see, in which way and to what extent they may have influenced the English author, therefore I will take in consideration: *Emile, or On Education* (or *Émile, Or Treatise on Education*)⁴⁵

⁴⁴ A. Wilson, "Dickens on Children and Childhood", in *Dickens 1970*, ed. by Michael Slater, New York, Stein and Day, 1970, pp. 195-227, p.202.

⁴⁵ J. J. Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, (1762), ed. by Allan Bloom, New York, Basic Books, 1979.

Charles Dickens

It can be noticed that many characters in Dickens, in particular the children, present a set of characteristics listed and set forth by the French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In fact, most of the novels written by Dickens, namely: *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and others, presents specific characters that can be associated to one of the three types recognized by Rousseau: the natural man, the civilized man, and the citizen. It is the case, of Oliver, Nicholas, David and Pip whose lives inevitably pass through the three phases identified by Rousseau.

It must be said that even the environment and the places, play a fundamental role in the natural/civilized dichotomy that will be discussed: Dickens's experience of the urban setting will profoundly affect the growth of his young protagonists. Rousseau believed that rural life away from the city and large numbers of people, was more favourable to honesty and sincerity, on the other hand, city life leads to corruption and immorality. Dickens's novels contain a similar attitude, although as both Dickens and Rousseau concluded, life in the country is less and less possible in the industrial era, so the only right choice is to become a citizen, and live with genuine and spontaneous instincts within the city. As Sanders and Acroyd sustain, Dickens always needed to have the city of London as reference point for the settings of many of his production.

2.1 CHARLES DICKENS AND HIS WORKING METHOD

There is no doubt that Dickens perceived his work as a steady and patient art, which absorbed all his life; Robert William Buss's painting *Dickens Dream* offers a vivid image of what Dickens's work of mind was: he is surrounded and completely engrossed by his characters and stories, which are shaping in front of him as in an inspiring dream. As his elder daughter Mary narrates in her book *Charles Dickens at Home, by his Eldest Daughter*, he preferred to write in the morning in his study and at the time of the lunch he used to go through the meal without saying a word, and then he went back to the work on which he was so completely absorbed.⁴⁶ Such a 'modus operandi' shows how devoted and intense his working method was, moreover he never accepted any considerable external help, even though we know that John Forster – his friend and biographer – was responsible for many suggestions and corrections in some of Dickens's works, over which he exerted an unquestionable influence.

Before starting to write the novel, Dickens used to decide the title from the very beginning. It has to be said however, that the title itself is often no more than the name of the protagonist, introducing the identity of the central figure and predicting a sort of biographical approach. Once the title is settled and the chapter or book division has been made, the story can start: most of his openings deal with a birth, in the very *Bildungsroman* style, but others, as *David Copperfield*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit* begin with two or more characters describing implicitly to the reader the circumstances necessary to enter the story and to provide a realistic background. What happens then is the alternation, during the whole novel, of narrative parts and dialogues: the storytelling is practically always pronounced by a third person narrator, but some novels, such as *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* make extensive use of the autobiographical form.

According to Monod, Dickens's "point of view is external to the characters; unlike George Eliot, Dickens does not analyze their thoughts: he describes their

⁴⁶ M. Dickens, *Charles Dickens by His Elder Daughter*, London, Cassel & Co., 1885, p.56.

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appearance, gestures, and actions, and transcribes their speech; he makes them live before us rather than think and feel".⁴⁷ In this way the reader and the writer are on the same level, they are beholders and spectators of the characters' movements and appearance and, by reflex, of their way of thinking and feeling. The effects and the reactions of the first readers can be traced in the newspaper *The Illustrated London News* of June 17th 1870:

A reaction, about thirty-four years ago, as many of us can well remember, against the high-flown affectations of classic and aristocratic elegance which pervaded the romances of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton. [...] Mr. Pickwick, of Goswell Street, in his gaiters and spectacles, with Sam Weller at his heels toddled forward and took possession of the stage.⁴⁸

However, Dickens's novels were also deep-seated in every-day life. In 1889, the publisher George Merriam exalted this feature, by saying that

Dickens belongs to the common people. [...] He is a man of the common people too in that he lives far more by feeling than by reason. He not seldom falls into exaggeration, for the sake of immediate effect, unrestrained by that accuracy of sight and speech which is the austere virtue of the intellect.⁴⁹

As a matter of fact, his 1836 collection of short pieces *Sketches by Boz*, is subtitled: *Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People*.

As I have already mentioned in the first chapter, one of the aim of Dickens's production was that of involving both moral and social responsibilities; and he did so through the social novel. He really denounced and condemned social abuses and injustices – he once wrote to the clergyman Thomas Robinson:

While you teach in your walk of life the lessons of tenderness you have learnt in sorrow, trust me that in mine, I will pursue cruelty and oppression, the enemies of all God's creatures, of all codes and creeds, so long as I have the energy of thought and the power of giving it utterance.⁵⁰

Proofs of his intentions can be traced directly in his novels: in the preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* he points out that many cheap Yorkshire schools in existence, were

⁴⁷ S. Monod, *Dickens, The Novelist*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968, p. 78.

⁴⁸ G. Tillotson, *op.cit.*, p.115.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.120.

⁵⁰ From *Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-1870*, Georgina Hogarth and Mary Dickens (ed.), letter to Rev. Thomas Robinson, April 8, 1814, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.43. Quotation from S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

disappearing. And at the end of *Hard Times*: “Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the heart, to see the ashes of our fires turn gray and cold”.⁵¹

These statements of moral intentions disclosed the impression he wished to create, in addition to it, he wanted to establish a link between him and the reader in order to establish a sort of mutual understanding. But his approach was not aggressive nor did he intend to hurt or shock anybody, according to Sylvère Monod he only wished to establish “a kind of sentimental exchange with the reader, out of which the author claims he receives as much as he is giving”.⁵² Dickens really felt the necessity to receive a support from his readers. That is one of the main causes, if not the principal, for which he decided to choose the periodical form of publication.

⁵¹ C. Dickens, *Hard Times*, in “Hard Times: And Reprinted Pieces, Volume 2, Works of Charles Dickens”, New York, Sheldon and Company, 1863, (scanned 13 march 2006 by Harvard University), p.62

⁵² S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 67

2.2 THE SERIALIZED NOVEL

By the second decade of the 19th century novels were usually published in three or four volume editions, the so called “three-deckers”, which were beyond the means of many middle class readers; yet they could be lent at the circulating libraries, a volume at a time by paying a guinea per year, thus enabling a great number of people to have access to the new works published and at a reasonable price.⁵³

The major part of the public could be finally reached only with the publication of the *Pickwick Papers* (April 1836-37) – the first novel by Charles Dickens – and the establishment of the success of the monthly part novel. Each single part of the serialized novel thus issued consisted in a booklet, available at the beginning of every month, of about thirty pages with advertisement and illustrations; it contained a few chapters of the novel, which was to be continued the following month. The final number was very ample and consisted of forty-eight pages and more illustrations.

This kind of publishing was anything but simple: of course, it provided a certain profit and ascendancy to Dickens and his patrons, but with a considerable effort.

The novel in parts imposed, in fact, strict limitations on the author who needed to be skilled and clever to create a connection throughout the monthly numbers as readers required suspense but also a sense of closure even if only momentary.

Dickens worked hard to achieve this result and he always made abundant alterations and changes on the proofs,

Dickens monthly routine as a rule, blocked off the first half of the month for writing, and the last half for corrections. Type was set by hand from Dickens’s close and difficult manuscript. Sometimes two or more sets of proofs might be struck before publication day [...], moreover he had to leave adequate time for his illustrator to prepare designs for plates.⁵⁴

Dickens was, therefore, a sort of pioneer of this method, as many of his novels appeared in this ‘unusual form’ as he himself called it. Only two other Victorian novelists tried to use the model of serialization for their works: Thackeray and Lever,

⁵³ M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*, London, Longman, 1985, pp.32-41

⁵⁴ R. Newsom, *Charles Dickens Revisited*, New York, Twayne, 2000, p.11

but ultimately they gave it up as unworkable.⁵⁵ This way of publishing enjoyed some fortune for a considerable period, but then was displaced by literary magazines and common serial publications that could be read in family: they consisted in weekly or monthly magazines easily accessible because of their topics and the strong censorship on them.

The best-selling among the magazines which were devoted to the serialization of fiction was Dickens's *All the Year Round* (1859) a weekly literary magazine, which succeeded the previous *Household Words* (1850) – Dickens at that time had some difficulties with the publishers Bradbury and Evans, therefore he became the editor of a magazine he owned and controlled. It is necessary, however, to mention some of the prominent serialized works that appeared in *Household Words*, such as Dickens's *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and *North and South*. The earliest issue of *All the Year Round* was printed on Saturday 30 April 1859, with the first episode of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. From the beginning it was extremely successful: "Our success here" – wrote W.H. Wills, *All the Year Round's* assistant editor – "has exceeded the most sanguine expectations. One hundred and twenty thousand of n°1 have already been sold and we are settling down to a steady current sale of one hundred thousand".⁵⁶

One of the most appreciated characteristics of the publication in parts was the suspense: with the ordinary novel in volume-form everyone had usually the temptation to turn to the last page and see at the end of the book how the events had developed and finished. With the monthly publication this temptation was no longer possible because there was no last page to turn to and that became the secret of the success; according to Graham Clarke:

Without a book before him the reader could not fix a sense of the novel in his mind, could not measure his awareness of the novel in relation to its thickness, its size, or of the pages still to be read. With the serial form the novel as an object is dissolved and any spatial relationship made fluid and diffuse because the reader could not look ahead or contemplate the novel as a whole [...] In this way the reader is 'obliged' to follow a patten and a scheme of reading which is established by the author, who can

⁵⁵ J. Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers, Basingstoke*, Palgrave Macmillan 2006, p. 86

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

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create empty spaces and little 'ends' in each issues so that the reader might hypothesize the sequel but could not be certain of it – The serial form took the control of the novel away from the reader and left him in an *imagined* space that could not be thought of in terms of the physical space still to be read.⁵⁷

The monthly publication also improved the relationship between writer and readers, it established a sort of acquaintance between them: the characters were topics for popular conversations because they resemble common people, even though sometimes they seems caricatures, moreover the readers used to give advice to the writer by writing letters about their feedback to every instalment, while the writer could have the measure of the appreciation of the episode he had created so far in this way the consequent episode of the novel could be adjusted properly.

⁵⁷ C. Graham, "Bound in Moss and Cloth': Reading a Long Victorian Novel", in *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form Book*, ed. Ian Gregor, London, Vision, 1980, p.66

2.3 DICKENS'S EARLY LIFE

Dickens remembered his conditions when he was a child very well. He was born in Portsea, but, after a period in Catham (Kent) the family moved to London in 1822 because of economic difficulties. The Dickens family dwelt in Camden Town – in his works the place will become the home of the Micawbers in *David Copperfield*, of Polly Toodles' family in *Dombey and Son* and of the Cratchits in *A Christmas Carol*.

When Charles's father, John Dickens, was incarcerated in the Marshalsea prison in the Southwark for debts, the young Charles was forced to leave school and employed in the shoe-blackening factory at Warren. For him this was a terrible period, Dickens dreams of becoming a gentleman seemed to disappear and he was humiliated by working with the rough men and boys at the factory, but most of all his resentment towards her mother increased: Elizabeth Barrow insisted resolutely on his employment at the Warehouse instead of letting him go to school; while his sister Frances was a privileged student in the Royal Academy of Music.

At that time, Dickens suffered much from his position, but his experience was destined to become fictionalized – he was able in fact to extract some good material for his books from the bad experiences of his early life, as Edmund Wilson asserts:

The work of Dickens's whole career was an attempt to digest these early shocks and hardships, to explain them to himself, to justify himself in relation to them, to give an intelligible and tolerable picture of a world in which such things could occur.⁵⁸

London, the great City, became the main background of his novels and its descriptions allow readers of every period and every place to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of it. London is the place where he and his characters lived, there they have learned

The intricacies of lawyers and the absurdities of their clerks; the full meaning of 'shabby-genteel'; the ways of landladies and lodgers; the social pretensions of obscure men; the use of money; the sins of poverty; the value of ugliness; the love of death.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ E. Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow – Seven Studies in Literature*, UK, Taylor and Francis Pub., 1952, p.7

⁵⁹ H. House, *The Dickens World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960 p.20

Charles Dickens

Dickens spent most of his years in London, years that made an impression on his writer's career: *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* date back to that first sad period of his infancy.

We can notice that already from his experience at Warren's Blacking factory he suffered like David at Murdstone and Grindby's: his fellows were low boys with whom he never established a good relationship. Dickens wrote: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship [...] I worked, from morning to night with common men and boys" or " My conduct and manners were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They, and the men, always spoke of me as 'the young gentleman'".⁶⁰

Dickens once narrates this episode to his friend Forster: one of his companions, named Bob Fagin, once insisted on escorting him home after work. Young Charles was so embarrassed – because at that time his father was in the Marshalsea Prison – that contrived a device to conceal his secret:

I was too proud to let him know about the prison; and after making several efforts to get rid of him, to all of which Bob Fagin in his goodness was deaf, shook hands with him on the steps of a house near Southwark Bridge on the Surrey side, making believe that I lived there. As a finishing piece of reality in case of his looking back, I knocked at the door, I recollect, and asked, when the woman opened it, if that was Mr. Robert Fagin's house.⁶¹

That same Fagin will be transformed into one of the villains of *Oliver Twist*. Moreover, his childhood nightmares resemble the one of David's: the blacking warehouse was

a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again.⁶²

In Robert Newsom's study we can read an extract of John Forster's biography of Charles Dickens, where Dickens's son, Henry, remembers how his father's past was inevitably present in everyday life, even in a simple evening with the family:

⁶⁰ J. Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination*, London, Faber pub., 1973 p.148

⁶¹ J. Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Book I Chapter II, Leipzig, Tauschnitz Edition, 1872, p. 150

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 163

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We had been playing a game that evening known as “The Memory Game”, in which, after a while, my father joined, throwing all his energy into it, as he always did in anything he put his hand to. One of the party started by giving a name, such as, for instance, Napoleon. The next person had to repeat this and add something of his own, such as Napoleon, Blackbeetle, and so on, until the string of names began to get long and difficult to remember. My father, after many turns, had successfully gone through the long string of words, and finished up with his own contribution, “Warren’s Blacking, 30, Strand”. He gave this with an odd twinkle in his eye and a strange inflection in his voice which at once forcibly arrested my attention and left a vivid impression on my mind for some time afterwards. Why, I could not, for the life of me, understand. When, however, his tragic history appeared in Foster’s Life, this game...flashed across my mind with extraordinary force, and the mystery was explained.⁶³

Foster’s biography permits us to glance upon Dickens’s past and the effect of it in his works; however, Newsom sustains that “the conditions Dickens worked under were far better than many a child laborer’s, and there were of course in this period many children who labored”.⁶⁴ Probably the real pain Dickens suffered was surely the poor conditions and the hard work, but most of all the suffering of the abandonment and the agony of keeping a heavy secret: the shame of his father’s imprisonment.

Dickens thereafter continued to put autobiographical fragments in many of his novels, until, after *Oliver Twist*, the child became a girl, even because he found easier to associate delicacy and purity to a female character; *Little Dorrit* came out from this idea, but this theory can also explain why David is called among his schoolfellows ‘Daisy’.

The child became one of the common thread of Dickens novels, a presence who explicitly and implicitly build the relationships within the characters, a fulcrum around which the whole story develops. As I have previously explained, and as Coveney confirms, Dickens’s “own experience as a child, and his awareness of children in the society about him, served to create a basis of feeling from which he launched the fundamental criticism of life for which his mature art is so remarkable”.⁶⁵ It is in this frame of view that I will analyze the theme of childhood in Dickens’s production.

⁶³ R. Newsom, *op.cit.*, p.7

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.28

⁶⁵ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p.111

The basis of childhood and infancy in the novels is the presence of feelings and emotions: the plot, the turn of the events and the intrigues of the stories have been created by the feelings and the experiences of their protagonists. This brought back to the importance of the experience as a force of conflict within the child's mind; Dickens has been seen, as the heir of the Romantic poets: he represents the nineteenth-century idea of sensibility, in the way that he receives the inheritance of Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Thanks to the role of the child, Dickens accomplishes to express his dissatisfaction towards the injustice and, most of all, to prove that with life experiences the child is deprived of his natural innocence and purity – even though this cannot be avoided.

Dickens perceived his personal adventures in childhood as a general occurrence of his time and from them he took inspiration for the struggle between badness and innocence, two aspects which are always present in his novels. The child became, therefore, a symbol of a pure instinctive feeling, against the material society hungry of progress, money and success; the young protagonist comes in contact with this corruption until his ingenuity develops into maturity and awareness of what the real world actually is.

2.3.1 THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

During the “age of machinery”, as the Victorian Age was also called, the process of industrialization which had started in the previous century, went on unhindered. The application of steam power to machines in textile industries, the cutting of new canals and the building of new roads and railways, which made transport easier and cheaper, transformed Great Britain from agricultural into an industrial country.

The Industrial Revolution accelerated the migration of people from the rural to the industrial areas in search of jobs; as a result, many of the towns and cities of the North and the Midlands rose and expanded rapidly. Consequently, within few years, the population of London and other industrial cities doubled and by the middle of the century more English and Welsh people lived in towns and cities than in the

countryside. Unfortunately, urbanization also meant intolerable overcrowding: a lot of people could not afford a well-off life, and turned up to live in slums – appalling quarters characterized by squalor, disease and crime – and cramped house with no lavatories, no sewers and no piped water. Because sanitary conditions in the slums and London periphery were so precarious, illness like typhus and cholera and were very common. The children's death rate was high and the terrible living conditions in polluted atmospheres had a disastrous effect on the little survivors' health.

The process of industrialization in this period went hand in hand with the ruthless exploitation of workers. Men, women and above all children worked in factories sometimes up to 14 to 16 hour a day , while factory owner paid very low wages. Women were employed in brickyards, potteries and match factories, while very young children were exploited in textile mills and mines. The industrial Revolution and its consequences are chronicled in Dickens's stories of exploited children, poverty, illnesses and a profound gap between social classes was at his higher level.

If the landscape undergoes a change in short time, the nineteenth century society had a real 'revolution': the eighteenth-century aristocrats collapsed under the force of the industrial development. The dilemma of the nineteenth century consists on the fear that in a world of progress and industrial advancement, the benevolent inclinations of human beings would be cancelled, there is no more place for charity and altruism. Business and enrichment are the key words, only the stronger and the slier survive. Dickens's novels describe the bad side of the social attitude, but at the same time they try to fix and exhume the good side and the benevolence of people especially towards children.

Dickens often underlined the sense of isolation and loneliness of the inhabitants of London, especially those of children and the excluded, unfortunately it was a general condition, and this description in *Dombey and Son* speak for itself:

She often looked with compassion, at such a time, upon the stragglers who came wandering into London, by the great highway hard by, and who, footsore and weary, and gazing fearfully at the huge town before them [...]Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, in one direction, always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the

churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice, and death, - they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost. (DS, 341)⁶⁶

Isolation is even more striking in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where, Little Nell is the 'lost' protagonist; when she first appears in the book she has already lost her way:

I turned hastily round and found at my elbow a pretty little girl, who begged to be directed to a certain street at a considerable distance, and indeed in quite another quarter of the town.

'It is a very long way from here,' said I, 'my child.'

'I know that, sir,' she replied timidly. 'I am afraid it is a very long way, for I came from there to-night.'

'Alone?' said I, in some surprise.

'Oh, yes, I don't mind that, but I am a little frightened now, for I had lost my road.' (OCS, 7)⁶⁷

The whole story is permeated of this sense of desolation and abandonment of Nell and of her beloved; during their wandering, they found themselves an industrial town in the Midlands:

Evening came on. They were still wandering up and down, with fewer people about them, but with the same sense of solitude in their own breasts, and the same indifference from all around. The lights in the streets and shops made them feel yet more desolate, for with their help, night and darkness seemed to come on faster. Shivering with the cold and damp, ill in body, and sick to death at heart, the child needed her utmost firmness and resolution even to creep along. Why had they ever come to this noisy town [...] They were but an atom, here, in a mountain heap of misery, the very sight of which increased their hopelessness and suffering. (OCS, 176)

2.3.2 EDUCATION IN DICKENS'S NOVELS

Apart from Dickens's interest in giving a social portrait of his age, according to Humphrey House the author was fascinated in almost all his novels about the environment's on the habits and character of a child. This aspect reminds of the link between Dickens and his Romantic predecessors: as Coveney adds: "Virtue was the natural state of man, and happiness its environment. For Dickens, as for Rousseau and

⁶⁶ All quotations to *Dombey and Son* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by N. Burgis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (DS) after the quotation.

⁶⁷ All quotations to *The Old Curiosity Shop* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (OCS) after the quotation.

Blake, man was born of a good father. The evil conditions of society prevented his entering into his kingdom".⁶⁸ That is why the slums became symbol of an inner spiritual decline and deterioration in the hearth of the city and its citizens – consequently of the society.

However Dickens's attitude was not that of an educator; as an heir of Blake's theory, he was more attracted towards the sentimental effects that education had upon young individuals, and, in the school the innocent child is more vulnerable to feel miserable and inadequate, or at least school is the first place where he experiments this condition. Dickens's teachers are numerous: from Wackford Squeers – the cruel, one-eyed, schoolmaster in *Nicholas Nickleby*, who mistreats the boy by starving and beating them, Blimber in *Dombey and Son*, Creakle – the harsh headmaster of Salem House in *David Copperfield*, and Mr Wopsle in *Great Expectations*. It can be seen that they are mostly bad representatives of the category, and are all educators in private or boarding schools. Maybe Dr Strong's institute in *David Copperfield* gets closer to a positive model, and his master is described in good words too:

Doctor Strong's was an excellent school; as different from Mr. Creakle's as good is from evil. It was very gravely and decorously ordered, and on a sound system; with an appeal, in everything, to the honour and good faith of the boys, and an avowed intention to rely on their possession of those qualities unless they proved themselves unworthy of it, which worked wonders. We all felt that we had a part in the management of the place, and in sustaining its character and dignity. [...] But the Doctor himself was the idol of the whole school: and it must have been a badly composed school if he had been anything else, for he was the kindest of men; with a simple faith in him that might have touched the stone hearts of the very urns upon the wall.⁶⁹ (DC, 231)

Even Religion had a role on the education of the child's behaviour and approach towards life, Dickens, plays with the perception of death in children's mind, but he also present religion as mean of stern education. Arthur Clennan in *Little Dorrit*, reminds his childhood as a 'dreary Sunday' when

he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to

⁶⁸ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p.124

⁶⁹ All quotations to *David Copperfield* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by N. Burgis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (DC) after the quotation.

Charles Dickens

Perdition? [...] There was the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a piquet of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy. (LD, 47)⁷⁰

Even David is mistreated by the Murdstones austere religion: he recollects the sensations he felt when Sunday came: “The gloomy taint that was in the Murdstone blood, darkened the Murdstone religion, which was austere and wrathful.”, “Again, the dreaded Sunday comes round, and I file into the old pew first, like a guarded captive brought to a condemned service”. (DC, 49)

And also their policy of education:

As to any recreation with other children of my age, I had very little of that; for the gloomy theology of the Murdstones made all children out to be a swarm of little vipers and held that they contaminated one another. The natural result of this treatment, continued, I suppose, for some six months or more, was to make me sullen, dull, and dogged. (DC, 52)

⁷⁰ All quotations to *Little Dorrit* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, UK, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (LD) after the quotation.

2.4 ROUSSEAU AND DICKENS

Many studies have demonstrated that in the writings of Dickens there are elements of Romanticism, to the point that he has been called a “Romantic-Realist”. The critics opinion are quite diverse: there are many evidences that Dickens was fond of reading, citing a catalogue of Dickens’s bookshelves at his home at Devonshire Terrace, Andrew Sanders states that those shelves were occupied by “books of the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Southey, among others”.⁷¹ But Donald S. Stone says that despite his adequate collection, “his knowledge of the Romantic poets was spotty and Dickens was an instinctive Romantic”,⁷² his ability was not that of following the wake of the great poets, but it was an innate romantic capacity. Palmer, on the other hand, claims that “Dickens’ vision derives from an eighteenth-century philosophical view which all his life he tried to apply to an unaccommodating Victorian world”⁷³ and adds that “while Dickens probably did not read the works of Enlightenment philosophers, he did read the novels of Sterne, Fielding, and Goldsmith, all of whom promoted similar optimistic views of humankind”.⁷⁴

Francesco Casotti, in his article “Dickens e Rousseau” agrees with Palmer, stating that Dickens probably did not read philosophical works, nor even did he have the preparation necessary to understand them and develop a passion for them. “He was greatly limited”, says Casotti, “by his culture when it came to the French authors, at least in the French language; included among the authors to which he was exposed are Voltaire and Buffon, but not Rousseau”. Casotti then cites three critics who have examined closely and explored in detail the culture of Dickens: Sylvère Monod, Humphry House and Edgar Johnson and notes that none of the three mentions Rousseau.⁷⁵

⁷¹ A. Sanders, *Dickens and the Spirit of the Age*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999, p.82

⁷² D. Stone, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, p.250

⁷³ W. Palmer, *Dickens and the Eighteenth Century*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1977, p. 17

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.21

⁷⁵ F. Casotti, *Dickens e Rousseau*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 1969, p.281

Sylvère Monod, in his *Dickens the Novelist*, mentions Dickens's reference to his use of Rousseau in *A Tale of Two Cities*, but does not include Rousseau in the list of French writers that Dickens "certainly read" such as "Voltaire and Buffon".⁷⁶ At the same time, however, Monod maintains: "But an attempt to formulate Dickens' philosophy (a thing he wisely refrained from doing himself, except for desultory maxims) indicates that he had four major tenets in his system: 1) theoretically, man, especially isolated, natural man, is good; 2) Dickens has clearly asserted in some of his occasional writings that he believed neither in the Noble Savage, nor in the virtues of solitude; 3) man is exposed to all kinds of pernicious influences (and these will be all the more pernicious as the individual's environment is more highly civilized and more socially refined); 4) man is reduced to impotence as soon as he belongs to a group".⁷⁷ Apart from point number two, Monod outlines, involuntarily, the basic philosophy of Rousseau, as well as that of Dickens, yet he does not openly make the connection. But Monod then goes on to show that Dickens also was sceptical of society, and "saw the majority as likely to oppress the minority",⁷⁸ an idea that is surely in Rousseau style.

2.4.1 ROUSSEAU'S CHILDHOOD PHILOSOPHY – ÉMILE, OR ON EDUCATION

The question that Rousseau seeks to answer in *Émile*⁷⁹ is what is the best method to raise a child in a civilized society, thus he explores the educational process that would allow a child to develop naturally, without losing his "original dispositions" (EOE, 39), and then become a "man of nature" (EOE, 255).

His purpose of the novel is clarified in the following statement:

Although I want to form the man of nature, the object is not, for all that, to make him a savage and to relegate him to the depths of the woods. It suffices that, enclosed in a social whirlpool, he not let himself get carried away by either the passions or the

⁷⁶ S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p.46

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.25

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.26

⁷⁹ All quotations are taken from: Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Emile, or On Education* (1762), ed. by Allan Bloom, New York, Basic Books, 1979, references will be given after the quotation in parenthesis as (EOE)

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opinions of men, that he see with his eyes, that he feel with his heart, that no authority govern him beyond that of his own reason. (EOE, 255)

Throughout the treatise, Rousseau reports the instruction of *Émile*, explaining and listing the best practices to employ during each stage of human development in order to achieve the goal, but firstly he sums up what the teacher needs to do: "What must be done is to prevent anything from being done".(EOE, 41) This hermetic statement is not the only one that can be read through the pages of the book: one of the most frequently-quoted statements of Rousseau's belief in original goodness is the opening sentence of *Émile*: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man".(EOE, 37) But he repeated it later in the work by saying, "There is no original perversity in the human heart. There is not a single vice to be found in it of which it cannot be said how and whence it entered". (EOE, 92)

Rousseau describes the effects of civilization. He says that prejudices, authority and all the social institutions submerge adults and children, moreover the innocent nature in us is stifled and replaced by with sterile and impersonal behaviour. Nature would be "like a shrub that chance had caused to be born in the middle of a path and that the passers-by cause to perish by bumping into it from all sides and bending it in every direction". (EOE, 37)

Once again Rousseau affirms that the student should be taught the dangers of civilized society: "Let him see that society depraves and perverts men; let him find in their prejudices the source of all their vices".(EOE, 237) There are no compromises in the growing of a child: in fact, Rousseau says, "Forced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time".(EOE, 39) His primary concern is making a man.

Many times in the treatise, Rousseau declares his objections to the city and his appreciation of the country:

Men are made not to be crowded into anthills but to be dispersed over the earth which they should cultivate. The more they come together, the more they are corrupted. The infirmities of the body, as well as the vices of the soul, are the unfailing effect of this overcrowding. Man is, of all the animals, the one who can least live in herds. Men crammed together like sheep would all perish in a very short time.

Cities are the abyss of the human species. At the end of a few generations the races perish or degenerate. They must be renewed, and it is always the country which provides for this renewal. Send your children, then, to renew themselves, as it were, and to regain in the midst of the fields the vigour that is lost in the unhealthy air of overpopulated places [...] in an abode more natural to the species, the pleasures connected with the duties of nature would soon efface the taste for the pleasures not related to those duties. (EOE, 59)

Shortly after this declaration, he explains that these are the reasons, among others, why he wishes to raise the pupil in the country. In addition, Rousseau claims in *Émile*:

Do you know the surest means of making your child miserable? It is to accustom him to getting everything; since his desires grow constantly due to the ease of satisfying them, sooner or later powerlessness will force you, in spite of yourself, to end up with a refusal. And this unaccustomed refusal will give him more torment than being deprived of what he desires. First, he will want the cane you are holding; soon he will want your watch; after that he will want the bird flying by; he will want the star he sees shining; he will want everything he sees. Without being God, how will you content him? (EOE, 87)

He goes on pointing out that “The propriety, the fashions, and the customs which derive from luxury and high style confine the course of life to the dullest uniformity. The pleasure one wants to enjoy in others’ eyes is lost for everyone; it is enjoyed neither by them nor by oneself”. (EOE, 351)

Compassion and benevolence are qualities and aptitudes that Rousseau also encouraged in his student in *Émile*. He says once again that pity is “the first relative sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature”.(EOE, 222) He suggests the teacher to “lavish the influence of your pupil’s parents in favour of the weak man to whom justice is denied and who is crushed by the powerful man. Loudly proclaim yourself the protector of the unfortunate. Be just, humane, and beneficent. Give not only alms; give charity. Works of mercy relieve more ills than does money. Love others, and they will love you”.(EOE, 95) The ambition of such teaching is to bring “the love of humanity to the depths of one’s heart. It is in doing good that one becomes good [...] Busy your pupil with all the good actions within his reach. Let the interest of the indigents always be his. Let him assist them not only with his purse but with his care”.(EOE, 250)

When Dickens's characters are measured with the traits of Rousseau's natural man similarities and congruence become bold and undeniable. More importantly, we can notice that from the beginning to the end of Dickens's career, he sets forth his belief in the presence of natural goodness in the world and in mankind.

It can be noticed that the natural characters in the second half of Dickens's production, not only exist, but also overcome their challenges and find a greater happiness than they had previously enjoyed. And more often than not, intentionally or not, they are emissary of redemption for the other characters with which they are associated.

2.4.2 ROUSSEAU'S IDEAS IN DICKENS'S CHARACTERS

As it has been stated, Rousseau believed that humans are naturally good but society and civilization are responsible for their corruption, however, after all, humans are redeemable and can be perfectible. These ideas were first set forth in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755), and were elucidated in his later works, notably *Julie* (1761), *Émile* (1762), and *The Social Contract* (1762).

In *Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau contrasts the fictional being he calls "natural man" with so-called "civilized man". Rousseau's natural man is not the primordial warrior, the Native American, or the Australian aborigine; instead, he is an entity described as Rousseau imagined him, before the coming of agriculture, industry, business, civilization and progress. Actually no such entity exists nor existed, and therefore Rousseau's "natural man" is only a philosophical construct rather than a historical reality. However, Rousseau's theory indicates that this fictional natural man had a particular set of positive characteristics, including a nonviolent attitude, a quality which disappears as civilization takes possession of him. Thus, he evolved into the Rousseau's "civilized man", whose qualities may be seen to be the unpleasing opposite of those manifested by the "natural man".

Oliver Twist, perhaps, is the most convincing prototype of this attempt of dishonesty over the "natural man", avoided by the redeeming power of the boy: we see Oliver as a child, we can watch him while he resists the corruptive forces around

him trying while they try to depraved his naturalness. But 'natural adults' are even more notable, since they have retained these qualities and their innate goodness throughout their lives until adulthood: Joe Gargery, Tom Pinch and Dan Peggotty won against the forces of civilization that might have changed them, it must be said however that this aspect, which is most evident in Joe Gargery present surely an innate goodness, but it is associated with ignorance, superficiality and uncouthness. On the other hand, characters such as Ralph Nickleby, Uriah Heep, Jacob Marley, Jonas Chuzzlewit, James Steerforth, and a host of others, are portrayed as people who closely fit Rousseau's definition of the "civilized man".

Like Rousseau, Dickens also depicts characters who have fallen from benevolence but who have achieved through redemptive actions the state of what we might call a new naturalness and a wiser awareness, such as Ebenezer Scrooge, Pip, and Martin Chuzzlewit the younger. For Dickens, we may say that these characters are the redeemed. It is perhaps these characters that most clearly reflect Dickens's belief in human perfectibility, because each of them is a notably better person at the end of the novel than he was at the beginning.

In addition to these character types, other relevant similarities exist between Dickens and Rousseau. As stated earlier, Rousseau also suggests a belief in the restorative properties of solitude, nature, and rural life as part of his theory, mainly because "civilization" only takes place when humans are in too-close proximity to one another. While some critics would argue that Dickens did not share such beliefs, there is evidence in his novels to suggest otherwise. Dickens shows – in the novels analysed in this study – an optimism towards humankind and a belief that humans can always move towards perfection in spite of the corruptive influences of "civilized" society. In these beliefs we can see an affinity between Dickens and the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau states that:

The poor man does not need to be educated. His station gives him a compulsory education. He could have no other. On the contrary, the education the rich man receives from his station is that which suits him least, from both his own point of view and that of society[...]. Let us, then, choose a rich man [to educate]. We will at least be

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sure we have made one more man, while a poor person can become a man by himself.⁸⁰

Like Rousseau, Dickens tends towards the preservation of the natural traits that are present in children, as we can see in his belittling criticism of English educational practices in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times*. Unfortunately, however, in his society, and therefore in his fiction, this preservation results impossible. Like Rousseau, Dickens detested institutions he thought created more problems they were meant to correct. Steven Marcus notes that Dickens shows “early animosity to the idea of institutions themselves, and to the idea that society needed them for its survival”,⁸¹ referring to Dickens’s presentation of the Poor Law and its components in *Oliver Twist*. And in discussing the “obsession with thwarted or threatened innocence in nineteenth-century England” Peter Ackroyd indicates “the number of child prostitutes in the streets, and of child labourers in the mines and factories” as “a terrible indictment of Victorian civilization, which seemed to have been built upon the shuddering backs of oppressed innocents”,⁸² an accusation with which Dickens ardently agreed.

As Rousseau posits and Dickens illustrates, the negative effects result in the individual’s development of a number of identifiable traits of the so-called “civilized man”; traits opposite to those of the natural man. Rousseau’s civilized man only becomes so when he joins with other men (and women) in communities and societies. As long as the natural man stays alone, no impetus for pride, competition, masks, or any other of the typical social characteristics develops. Therefore, according to Rousseau’s theory, the civilized man is only found in society, ultimately in the city. Dickens believed similarly because each example of the civilized man within his novels lives in close proximity to others, even though some of them (e.g., Ralph Nickleby and Scrooge) do their best to remain isolated from the rest of humankind. The natural man has a reliance on his inner evaluative standards, on the contrary, civilized men and women must have a confirmation to feel their own self worth and that confirmation of

⁸⁰ J. J. Rousseau, *op.cit.*, p.52

⁸¹ S. Marcus, *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey*, New York, Basic Books, 1965, p. 89

⁸² P. Ackroyd, *The Life and Times of Charles Dickens*, London, Harpercolins Publisher. 2002, p. 64

the self image is given by the feedback of the others. For instance, David Copperfield feels young and immature when he thinks about his association with Spewlow and Jorkins, “on account of the clerks poking one another with their pens to point [him] out”.(DC, 345) In the same way, young Pip feels rough and inferior because of the response and the insults he receives from Estella.

Whereas the natural man is innocent, naïve about the world, and especially about vice of any kind, the civilized man is worldly wise and willing to go to any lengths, even criminal ones, to reach his goals. In Dickens, this again is found in varying degrees. Some characters can and will play political and social games to gain status or wealth, such as Bumble the Beadle in *Oliver Twist* and Uncle Pumblechook in *Great Expectations*, but they commit no real crimes. Some others, like Steerforth, Pecksniff, and Estella, prey on the naiveté of others to make a temporary conquest, or assert their power and position to gain control over the others. Then there are actual criminals including Fagin, Bill Sikes, and Monks, Ralph Nickleby and Uriah Heep. Regardless of the degree of criminality to which these characters go, they share a common factor: their behaviour always involves one victim at least. The presence of these wicked or evil people helps to show the bad consequences of being civilized without any natural trait left.

In *David Copperfield* the protagonist displays some civilized characteristics, but he also displays natural ones. While he grows as a human being throughout the novel, he matures in a civilized adult. This novel is in fact a *Bildungsroman*, and presents a comparison between the presumably natural protagonist and civilized men and women representing the forces and the institutions of society. David meets a number of these types—the Murdstones, Mr. Micawber, and Steerforth, to name the most prominent ones—but his major antagonist is Uriah Heep. From his first appearance to the last, he wears a mask of humbleness, the one he learned to wear as a schoolboy:

Father and me was both brought up at a foundation school for boys; and mother, she was likewise brought up at a public, sort of charitable, establishment. They taught us all a deal of umbleness—not much else that I know of, from morning to night. We was to be umble to this person, and umble to that; and to pull off our caps here, and to make bows there; and always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters. And we had such a lot of betters! Father got the monitor-medal by being umble. So did I. Father got made a sexton by being umble. He had the character,

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among the gentlefolks, of being such a well-behaved man, that they were determined to bring him in. 'Be umble, Uriah,' says father to me, 'and you'll get on. It was what was always being dinned into you and me at the school; it's what goes down best. Be umble,' says father, 'and you'll do!' And really it ain't done bad! (DC, 558)

On one occasion David reports, "He told me, when I shook hands with him, that he was proud to be noticed by me, and that he really felt obliged to me for my condescension" (DC, 362). David is repulsed by such shows of subservience, mainly because they are often accompanied by undulating, writhing movements that suggest those of a serpent. Finally, when he is confronted with his treachery, Heep finds his mask removed. David comments:

Though I had long known that his servility was false, and all his pretences knavish and hollow, I had had no adequate conception of the extent of his hypocrisy, until I now saw him with his mask off. The suddenness with which he dropped it, when he perceived that it was useless to him; the malice, insolence, and hatred, he revealed; the leer with which he exulted, even at this moment, in the evil he had done—all this time being desperate too, and at his wits' end for the means of getting the better of us—though perfectly consistent with the experience I had of him, at first took even me by surprise, who had known him so long and disliked him so heartily. (DC, 730)

Heep's condition as a schoolboy leads to his seeking of being submissive and treacherous. As we have seen, Uriah uses this reality and appearance to his own advantage, pretending to be an innocent and miserable and mistreated creature: he tells David, "When I was quite a young boy [...] I got to know what umbleness did, and I took to it. I ate umble pie with an appetite. I stopped at the umble point of my learning, and says I, 'Hold hard!' When you offered to teach me Latin, I knew better. 'People like to be above you,' says father, 'Keep yourself down.' I am very umble to the present moment, Master Copperfield, but I've got a little power!" (DC, 558)

On the other hand, Pip becomes Dickens's version of Rousseau's citizen. But he is redeemed through hardships and thanks to the agency of his friends, becoming a more enlightened human being. He finds compassion within himself and he recognizes the pride and the arrogance which had led him to reject the two best influences on his life; and he realizes that gentility has no necessary connection to social status or wealth and that richness is not a mean through which the value of a person can be measured. But this process takes place over time; Pip evolves into a citizen, partially as

the result of disappointments in his life and, that must be said, thanks to the loss of his expectations.

Humphry House in his study *The Dickens World*, does not mention Rousseau, but he notices that Dickens frequently used the word “natural” (referring to the ‘natural state of man’) and says that Dickens “always adopts the view that man as a child of a good father is himself good, and that the evils of the world are obstructions which prevent him from being himself”.⁸³ These views are similar, if not identical, to Rousseau’s.

A number of critics include Rousseau as a significant component of their argument on Dickens production. These critics can be divided into three categories: those who focus on Rousseau’s ideas regarding childhood, based on his *Émile*, those who focus on his ideas regarding politics (*The Social Contract*), and those who focus on his ideas regarding human nature.

Peter Coveney was one of the first critics, to explore a relationship between Dickens’s and Rousseau’s ideas about childhood. In his book *The Image of Childhood*, as already written, Coveney underlines Dickens’s affinities with Rousseau , especially their belief in natural goodness and their interest in sensibility, but also in his bold portrayal of the institutions of society – see the schools and the education system – that seek to corrupt the innocence of childhood.

Mark Spilka, using Coveney’s work as model, also explores the development of childhood as a theme in literature. Spilka’s work contains striking similarities to Coveney’s, exploring, as he former does, the cultural development moving from the Romantic poets, through Dickens, and on to Freud. Rousseau – Spilka says – was the first to present the child “as a being important in itself [...] an active soul endowed with natural tendencies to virtue which needed careful nourishment”. In short, Rousseau substitutes “the severe Christian doctrine of Original Sin with another Christian doctrine, that of Original Innocence or natural virtue”.⁸⁴ According to Spilka, the English Romantics were “cultivators of solitude and communion with nature and with

⁸³H. House, *op.cit.*, p.111-112

⁸⁴M. Spilka, “On the Enlightenment of Poor Monkeys by Myth and Dream; or, How Dickens Rousseauisticized and Pre-Freudianized Victorian Views of Childhood”, In *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. by Don Richard Cox., Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1984, p. 164

natural types like peasants and children” who “transposed this doctrine into poetry”, and the Victorian novelists, most notably Dickens, “who are essentially urban, social, or immersed in social and civic conflict”,⁸⁵ rearranged it from the work of the Romantics. Therefore the focus on the child, seen in Dickens as the childlike perspective of David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, and Pip, becomes the connecting thread.

Spilka makes another significant point in regard to Rousseau’s influence on Dickens:

It was Dickens who first identified with the childhood victims of social injustice, and who presented from their point of view, and with the emotional honesty, the innocent directness, the touching vulnerability which can be expressed through that perspective, the absurdities, tyrannies, and obtuseness of the adult social world.⁸⁶

And then adds:

He [Dickens] uses Rousseau, as it were, as his entering wedge in that assault on our *other* middle-class predilections. Thus Obedience and Forbearance, Diligence and Factuality, are often challenged by his childhood victims of adult inequities. When offered poor nutrition or unrewarding labor or the impoverished abstractions of utilitarian science, these self-active claimants of Rousseauistic rights win our assent by demanding richer fare.⁸⁷

Emphasizing Rousseau’s nature of children as well as his revolutionary overtones, Spilka and Coveney present a clear link between Rousseau and Dickens.

Malcolm Andrews is the author of two works in which he discusses Dickens’s views of childhood and his connection with Rousseau. In his book *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child* (1994), he places much emphasis on a link between Dickens’s views of childhood and eighteenth-century theories of primitivism, that is, of the noble savage. Andrews asserts,

Children in Dickens’s fiction are often presented as little newcomers from a pre-lapsarian world, bewildered as they try to make their way through the streets of Victorian London”: a reception of the child that can be traced back to “eighteenth-century primitivism, mediated through the writings of the early Romantics.”⁸⁸

Andrews sees Rousseau as one of these mediators, because later in this argument, Andrews does make a direct connection between Dickens’s views of childhood and Rousseau’s “emphatic belief in the importance of respecting the early natural impulses

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.169

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.170

⁸⁸ M. Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press 1994, p.9

of the child”⁸⁹ as expressed in *Émile*. Andrews says that Dickens considered “as the proper culture of childhood [...] the cultivation of the sentiments and affections, playing with toys, knowledge of the world of fairy-tale” a point of view that perfectly coincides with Rousseau’s belief that parents should “Leave childhood to ripen in [their] children”.⁹⁰ This concept, of course, is applicable to the theories of education of both Dickens and Rousseau, but as Andrews’s title denotes, many of Dickens’s fictional children are forced by life circumstances to grow up, and become little adults very quickly.

In his article in *The Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens* published in 1999, Andrews refers to two approaches towards children that were preponderant in the Victorian era, these attitudes come from the study by Walter Houghton: *The Victorian Frame of Mind* of 1957.

Houghton wrote that “Rousseau and Wesley can be thought of as the immediate fountainheads of the two great streams of Victorian morality”.⁹¹ Andrews says, as Houghton before him, that John Wesley represents the view of childhood “as a condition of innate depravity” and Rousseau represents the view that childhood is “a period of natural innocence and purity”.⁹² Both views “had by Dickens’s time become popular clichés” and “these contradictory valuations constituted Dickens’s ideological heritage in terms of his attitudes toward childhood”. Andrews goes on to say that “Dickens is held to be the Victorian champion of the Rousseauesque-Romantic idealization of childhood”.⁹³ Andrews notes that Rousseau’s views of childhood became popular together with the belief that already from his earliest days, a child “is prey to the corrupting influence of civilization with its unnatural restraints and enervating luxuries”,⁹⁴ these ideas, of course, are the basic constituents in the novels of Dickens.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.23

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.84

⁹¹ W. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1957, p. 267

⁹² M. Andrews, “Childhood”, in *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens*, Ed. Paul Schlicke, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 87

⁹³ Ibid., p.88

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.87

2.4.3 DICKENS AND ROUSSEAU: THE GEOGRAPHICAL DICHOTOMY BETWEEN COUNTRY AND CITY.

Following Rousseau's belief that cities were the scenes of human corruption and that one could live a fully natural life only in the country; Dickens proposes the city of London as the central focus from which all the troubles begin.

The city is described many times in its poverty, greed, social pretentiousness, religious hypocrisy, filth, disease, and overcrowdedness. But even if he attacked the institutions responsible for its many problems, Dickens's love for the city encouraged him to help its improvement by denouncing criminality, ignorance and disparity. In any case, he generally presents the country as a peaceful refuge from the anxieties produced by civilization. The beauty of nature, innocence and simple mutual respect among inhabitants, the general sense of peace and tranquillity are pictured as country characteristics, and Dickens's characters often find their own self in such settings, after some vicissitudes in the city. As Andrew Sanders affirms:

Dickens was not [...]merely inspired *by* London; he *needed* London, whether physical or imagined, in order to write [...]Dickens worked with and from the stimuli offered by a raucous, kaleidoscopic, urban community. He thought of crowds as energetic and energizing.⁹⁵

Ackroyd adds:

He said always that he needed the "magic lantern" of London's streets to keep his vision bright, and his immersion in the anonymous crowds of the city materially affected the nature of his invention. He needed their energy and their motion, their anonymity and their cohesion. It was as if a thousand different stories swirled around him [...]In turn his novels are filled with the crowds of London, and are animated by the transience and the spectacle of street life.⁹⁶

Robert Barnard, too, supports this perspective:

Dickens was a town-boy[...]Like most Londoners he takes pleasure in his expertise in coping with the complexities of the place[...]He rejoices in and dwells on misleading streets which lead to surprising destinations, and especially in blocked ways and No Thoroughfares. In the early part of his career the reading is mainly conscious of the infectious delight in the description [...] ⁹⁷

⁹⁵ A. Sanders, *op.cit.*, p.82

⁹⁶ P. Ackroyd, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-49

⁹⁷ R. Barnard, *Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens*, New York, Humanities Press 1974, pp. 13-14

If we take into consideration only the bond between Dickens and the city life, we can agree with some critics, like Schwarzbach, who professed mainly Dickens loyalty to the urban environment without considering the rural settings and country life. Schwarzbach, says that Dickens was “forced to borrow conventional language and imagery to describe the country, resulting in writing as boring as it is unimaginative,” and that “The country scenes or provincial towns in these novels are rarely differentiated or invested with any memorable qualities whatsoever [...]”.⁹⁸

According to Donald Stone “the country-dweller” in Dickens perceives the rural life as “an enervating way of life that suggests the calm of death”,⁹⁹ hence not as an attractive lifestyle for anyone with activity and energy, but as a place for weaks. Sanders adds that “Dickens’s style is commonly awkward, inexact, and flabby when he describes farmland, or grass or flowers”, and that he “had a town dweller’s preference for landscapes which were tamed, inhabited, cultivated, and relatively close to urban comforts. He generally seems to have felt ill at ease in landscapes that were either undomesticated or desolate”.¹⁰⁰ However, contrary opinions abound: Schwarzbach writes of “Dickens’ deepest and most cherished belief, in the ideal and idyllic nature of the years he had spent as a child in Chatham and the Kent countryside”,¹⁰¹ and Ackroyd observes that he “had always believed in the efficacy of fresh air as a restorative”.¹⁰²

It can be noticed, that as Dickens grew old, his earlier and hopeful dispositions towards life in the city seems to have reduced. Ackroyd marks that around the time he was writing *Little Dorrit*, “he seemed genuinely to dislike London,” perhaps because it “[represented] in monumental form the society that he had come to despise”.¹⁰³

Even though Dickens did not completely replace the country for the city (actually he just left London for Paris), in his stories he portrayed the city in

⁹⁸ F. S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, London, University of London, The Athlone Press 1979, p.62

⁹⁹ D. Stone, *op.cit.*, pp. 250-251

¹⁰⁰ A. Sanders, *op.cit.*, pp. 80-81-82

¹⁰¹ F. S Schwarzbach, *op.cit.*, p.173

¹⁰² P. Ackroyd, *op.cit.*, p. 201

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* pp. 160-161

progressively negative terms: as a prison, a labyrinth, wilderness, a tomb, and finally, in *Our Mutual Friend*, as a massive heap of dust. In 1860 his reluctance towards the life in the city, brought him to move with his family to Gad's Hill Place, a country house in Kent, where he lived for the last ten years of his life.

To sum up, Dickens shows his love, and even preference, for the city in most of his novels; however, he often demonstrates compatible ideas with Rousseau's ones – that rural life is healthier for the body, often happier for the soul, and most certainly, more genuine for the human being.

In *Oliver Twist* the corrupting nature of the city is more dominant and surpasses the provincial activity. Oliver's first impressions of London predicts the subsequent experiences of the young boy as a member of Fagin's gang:

A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. The sole places that seemed to prosper amid the general blight of the place, were the publichouses; and in them, the lowest orders of the Irish were wrangling with might and main. Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in the filth [...] (OT, 49)¹⁰⁴

Obviously, the overcrowding of the city creates the conditions in which dirt and diseases can proliferate and occasions for Fagin and his boys, Sikes, Monks, and others, to be successful in their lives of crime. Oliver's first natural impulse is to run away from all that corruption, but that, seems impossible once you are swallowed by the urban vortex. Due to fortuitous circumstances, Oliver finds himself in the country in a providential circumstance when he is rescued and nursed by the Maylie women, after joining with Bill Sikes on a housebreaking job. Rose, the orphan raised from childhood by Mrs. Maylie is moved by Oliver's sad story and tells him, "We are going into the country; and my aunt intends that you shall accompany us. The quiet place, the pure air, and all the pleasures and beauties of spring, will restore you in a few days".(OT 205) These words become really prophetic for Oliver, and once again, Dickens

¹⁰⁴ All quotations to *Oliver Twist* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by K. Tillotson, Oxford, Oxford Clarendon, 1966, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (OT) after the quotation.

contrasts the country's invigorating and beneficial effects with the oppression of the city:

Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquillity, the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness, deep into their jaded hearts! (OT, 210)

In *David Copperfield* we find probably the clearest manifestation of the power of nature and the countryside in the process towards redemption. David's final three-year journey into rural Switzerland is the final demonstration of how the protagonist finds healing for his corrupted soul in an extreme natural environment. But before David's break from the continent, Dickens includes in the novel other indications of the 'city – nature' dichotomy, using this disjunction for various purposes. For instance, Dickens uses rural nature to illustrate David's blind passion for Dora Spenlow. While David, Mr. Spenlow, Dora, and others are riding towards the site of Dora's birthday party, Mr. Spenlow asks David "what [he thinks] of the prospect", David answers:

I said it was delightful, and I dare say it was, but it was all Dora to me. The sun shone Dora, and the birds sang Dora. The south wind blow Dora, and the wildflowers in the hedges were all Doras, to a bud[...]I don't know how long we were going, and to this hour I know as little where we went[...]It was a green spot, on a hill, carpeted with soft turf. There were shady trees, and heather, and, as far as the eye could see, a rich landscape. (DC, 470)

After their marriage, Dora's presence makes David more acquainted with the beauty around him, his perception of time and space is completely based on the moments passed with Dora:

Weeks, months, seasons, pass along. They seem little more than a summer day and a winter evening. Now, the Common where I walk with Dora is all in bloom, a field of bright gold; and now the unseen heather lies in mounds and bunches underneath a covering of snow. In a breath, the river that flows through our Sunday walks is sparkling in the summer sun, is ruffled by the winter wind, or thickened with drifting heaps of ice. Faster than ever river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away. (DC, 609-610)

David sees the nature as the best background for his marriage and his love for Dora, because the two Dora and the nature, are both pure, genuine and spontaneous. The city, obviously, is the scene of corruption. When she first arrives in London, aunt Betsey Trotwood is doubtful and sceptical about anything she finds there. While eating

a roast fowl considered by David to be “excellent,” she comments, “I suppose this unfortunate fowl was born and brought up in a cellar [...]and never took the air except on a hackney coach-stand. I *hope* the steak may be beef, but I don’t believe it. Nothing’s genuine in the place, in my opinion, but the dirt”,(DC, 337) or, in the words of David “My aunt, who had this other general opinion in reference to London, that every man she saw is a pickpocket, gave me her purse to carry for her, which had ten guineas in it and some silver”.(DC, 340) But the most striking proof of the city as a place of dishonesty is found in the chapters in which Dan Peggotty and David recruit Martha in order to find Emily. Martha cries out to the Thames:

I know it’s like me! [...]I know that I belong to it. I know that it’s the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it—and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable—and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled—and I feel that I must go with it! (DC, 662)

Martha is describing herself and her life, she comes from the peaceful “country place” of Yarmouth, where “there was once no harm” ; now she is crawling through the “dismal streets” as a prostitute, “defiled and miserable”, moreover in the city there is a “great sea” of others who are just like her. She leads Mr. Peggotty and David through an “oppressive, sad, and solitary” neighbourhood, where

Coarse grass and rank weeds straggled over all the marshy land in the vicinity. In one part, carcasses of houses, inauspiciously begun and never finished, rotted away. In another, the ground was cumbered with rusty iron monsters of steam-boilers, wheels, cranks, pipes, furnaces, paddles, anchors, diving-bells, windmill-sails, and I know not what strange objects, accumulated by some speculator, and grovelling in the dust [...]Slimy gaps and causeways, winding among old wooden piles, with a sickly substance clinging to the latter, like green hair, and the rags of last year’s handbills offering rewards for drowned men fluttering above high-watermark, led down through the ooze and slush to the ebb tide. There was a story that one of the pits dug for the dead in the time of the Great Plague was hereabout; and a blighting influence seemed to have proceeded from it over the whole place. Or else it looked as if it had gradually decomposed into that nightmare condition, out of the overflowing of the polluted stream. (DC, 661)

Martha compares herself with “the refuse it [has] cast out, and left to corruption and decay”.(DC, 661) She is a victim of a civilized and condemnatory society, Martha, as well as Emily, considers herself beyond redemption. While the city can be a life-depriving entity with negative presences, the country is portrayed in the end of the novel as life-giving. After the agonizing death of the young Dora, David finds his

salvation and restoration by isolating himself in the Swiss Alps. As if he was a Romantic poet, he comments then, “If those awful solitudes had spoken to my heart, I did not know it. I had found sublimity and wonder in the dread heights and precipices, in the roaring torrents, and the wastes of ice and snow; but as yet, they had taught me nothing else.” However, he goes on to say:

I came, one evening before sunset, down into a valley, where I was to rest. In the course of my descent to it, by the winding track along the mountain-side, from which I saw it shining far below, I think some long-unwonted sense of beauty and tranquillity, some softening influence awakened by its peace, moved faintly in my breast. I remember pausing once, with a kind of sorrow that was not all oppressive, not quite despairing. I remember almost hoping that some better change was possible within me. (DC, 794)

He describes then the “richly green” mountain bases, the “forests of dark fir, cleaving the wintry snow-drift, wedge-like, and stemming the avalanche. Above these, were range upon range of craggy steeps, grey rock, bright ice, and smooth verdure-specks of pasture,” and the “sound of distant singing—shepherd voices”. As he silently observes and listens, he declares, “All at once, in this serenity, great Nature spoke to me; and soothed me to lay down my weary head upon the grass, and weep as I had not wept yet, since Dora died!” (DC, 794) The simple and plain life of the rural Switzerland brings David back to himself: physically his health, “severely impaired when [he] left England” (DC, 796), is greatly improved. But he speaks also of “the change that gradually worked in me, when I tried to get a better understanding of myself and be a better man”, (DC, 797) a spiritual change guided by the solitude in the nature, a change that leads him home to Agnes, and his destiny.

At the beginning of *Great Expectations*, Pip’s sphere of “country” is limited to the forge, the churchyard, and the nearby marshes. His world is small, and even though he enjoys the company of Joe and Biddy, he also suffers the abuse of some characters who are placed in the rural environment, but result mean and insincere: Mrs. Joe, Uncle Pumblechook, and their circle of friends. The bucolic setting of Pip’s childhood is not the pastoral ideal that Oliver experiences, nor is it completely free from some aspects of the corruption of the city. In fact, the slight separation between country and city can be seen in the country village near the forge, which is half natural

and half civilized. Pip announces, “[...] I loitered into the country on Miss Havisham’s side of town – which was not Joe’s side”(GE, 211).¹⁰⁵ Schwarzbach claims,

Together with the neighboring town, [the village] is presented as a complete microcosm of country society, with a church, various merchants, a clique of local dignitaries, and most importantly, the prison hulks and Satis House. Clearly, then Pip’s childhood is not spent in an idyllic fairyland, but in a place where all of the unpleasant and corrupting institutions and influences of society are already present.¹⁰⁶

The boundaries of city and country are misty, but this is indicative of how much civilization was progressively occupying the natural world, a contemporary reality that Dickens also portrayed in *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*. Even in *Great Expectations* the city is London and it becomes obviously the scene of Pip’s further civilization and corruption. Like many other characters before him, his first impressions are not encouraging. Pip says “We Britons had at that time particularly settled that it was treasonable to doubt our having and our being the best of everything: otherwise, while I was scared by the immensity of London, I think I might have had some faint doubts whether it was not rather ugly, crooked, narrow, and dirty”.(GE, 149) We can have a look at the great city through the eyes of a young hopeful boy, who describes Smithfield as a “shameful place, being all asmeared with filth and fat and blood and foam” and St. Paul’s as “the great black dome [...]bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison”.(GE, 151) Nonetheless Pip is dissatisfied also with the location of his first accommodation because, “So imperfect was this realization of the first of my great expectations, that I looked in dismay at Mr. Wemmick. "Ah!" said he, mistaking me; "the retirement reminds you of the country. So it does me.".(GE, 158) At this point, it is clear that Pip is divided between two options, but he seems to refuse both the country and the city, even if his great expectations seem possible and satisfactory. It is significant that Pip’s initial aversion to London will become then part of his being in his judgment and behaviour. Surrounded by the corruptive forces of civilization, Pip surrenders to the power of the masses and finds himself debt-ridden and abandoned, but not beyond redemption. The country

¹⁰⁵ All quotations from *Great Expectations* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by M.Cardwell, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (GE) after the quotation.

¹⁰⁶ F.S. Schwarzbach, *op.cit.*, p.149

plays a big role in Pip's convalescence from serious illness, as well as his redemption, as Joe takes him on a carriage ride in the open air:

And Joe got in beside me, and we drove away together into the country, where the rich summer growth was already on the trees and on the grass, and sweet summer scents filled all the air. The day happened to be Sunday, and when I looked on the loveliness around me, and thought how it had grown and changed, and how the little wild flowers had been forming, and the voices of the birds had been strengthening, by day and by night, under the sun and under the stars, while poor I lay burning and tossing on my bed, the mere remembrance of having burned and tossed there, came like a check upon my peace. But, when I heard the Sunday bells, and looked around a little more upon the outspread beauty, I felt that I was not nearly thankful enough [...](GE, 426-427)

Pip let us know the surroundings of this birth place only at this very moment, when his new vision of the world brings him to enjoy the splendour of nature, he becomes aware of the real gifts he has been given. He again manifests this change as he returns to the forge as a redeemed man; he notes:

The June weather was delicious. The sky was blue, the larks were soaring high over the green corn, I thought all that countryside more beautiful and peaceful by far than I had ever known it to be yet. Many pleasant pictures of the life that I would lead there, and of the change for the better that would come over my character when I had a guiding spirit at my side whose simple faith and clear home-wisdom I had proved, beguiled my way. They awakened a tender emotion in me; for, my heart was softened by my return, and such a change had come to pass, that I felt like one who was toiling home barefoot from distant travel, and whose wanderings had lasted many years. (GE, 435-436)

The change in Pip is obvious, nonetheless his plans of returning to live in the country are impeded by the marriage of Joe and Biddy, hence he decides to return to the civilized world as an older wiser citizen.

In *Great Expectations* two methods of flying the corruption of the city are illustrated. One method is manifested by Wemmick, who, according to Mark Spilka,

[...] wears two faces expressing the split between domestic and urban culture: one face, hard and wooden, with a postal slit for a mouth, he wears in the city; the other face, genial and relaxed, humane and sensitive, he wears in his home, which he literally calls his castle [...]. One face is designed to meet the corrupt dehumanizing commercialization of city life; the other the beneficent and genial aspects of domestic life, to which narrow pound the now two-faced Benevolent Man of the eighteenth century has obviously retreated, as indeed he had often retreated in his own time—after long exposure to worldly ills—to more pastoral environs.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ M. Spilka, *op.cit.*, p.166

Wemmick's "castle" is a rural retreat, a small part of the city in his country life, but Schwarzbach reminds us, "Wemmick's Castle is made possible only by the business connections with Newgate which he tries to keep distant from it, and by the portable property' he acquires from his condemned clients".¹⁰⁸ The hint here is that one cannot maintain connection with the civilized life and be fully natural. The other method, embodied by Joe, Biddy, and later little Pip, is that of being "completely disengaged from the city and the world".¹⁰⁹ This latter, of course, is the only sure way of preserving natural life and character, even if it presents strong social and cultural limits.

Both Dickens and Rousseau admitted that we live in a civilized world, that the power of society and the forces of civilization are overwhelming to most members, and it is more and more difficult to avoid the course of progress. Yet in every novel, natural characters play significant roles, whether or not they are the main characters. While I used one or two characters from each novel as an example, most of the novels have often multiple natural characters. As natural characters, I could just as well have discussed Sam Weller, Mr. Brownlow, Nicholas Nickleby, the Cheerybles, Mark Tapley, Agnes Wickfield, Biddy, John Harmon, Lizzie Hexam, or Betty Higden. Perhaps more remarkable is the number of redeemed characters, or citizens: in *Pickwick*, two characters are redeemed (Jingle and Job Trotter), in *David Copperfield*, three (Martha, Emily, Micawber), in *Great Expectations*, four (Pip, Estella, Magwitch, and Miss Havisham).

It can be noticed, however, that also the number of characters who develop into citizens increases; but that is indicative not of a progressive pessimism, but of an understanding of the manner in which the world itself is changing, and, more importantly, it reflects the numerous aspects and ways of redemption.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 191

¹⁰⁹ F. S. Schwarzbach, *op.cit.*, p.191

CHAPTER 3

BOYS

In this chapter I shall focus the attention on the role of boys in some Dickens's novels. The author's vision towards his little characters reveals frequent affinities between the young protagonists and Dickens's past. Of course each little hero has to pass through copious vicissitudes in order to become a mature citizen in a society which never helps the protagonist in this transformation, as Coveney notices:

In the early novels, evil is expressed through the characters of particular individuals, in Fagin and Monks, and Ralph Nickleby. Later he (Dickens) came to see evil as embodied in society itself and its institutions, of which individual men are either innocent victims or culpable agents.

Yet, the evil sphere would not exist without the good one: goodness is defined thanks to notable characters, who are rare for their "generous flow of human feeling".¹¹⁰ These particular noble characters are sometimes described as guardian angels, but many times they will disclose a real good nature during the course of the novel, by helping and supporting the main character, when others let him alone.

The subsequent paragraph deals with children's senses: touch, smell and sight. It is thanks to his primordial capacity that a child can develop a knowledge of the world around him and Dickens knew it very well. In his works he, in fact, reports, hints and flashes of children's points of view, giving us not only a general description of the setting and the other characters, but a juvenile perspective, through which the reader can perceive the child's sensations.

The first protagonist I will take in consideration is *Oliver Twist*: Dickens's work shows how a child should deal with the poor conditions in the workhouse, in his isolation, discrimination and vulnerability. Coveney states: "*Oliver Twist* was not a piece of accurate research; but, rather, the expression of what Dickens *felt* would happen to a child in a society which could conceive of the 1834 Act".¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p.113

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p.128

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Moreover Dickens tells us the experiences of the orphan in a city – London – where corruption and dishonesty rule. The reader will discover, however, that Oliver's real honest self and his mercy remain untouched until the end.

The second boy is David, the protagonist of the homonymous novel *David Copperfield*, one of Dickens's main works. It is a *Bildungsroman* which narrates the story of an orphan, his infancy, boyhood, adulthood, love, marriage and friendships. There is nothing better than Dickens words to present this boy: "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*".¹¹² I will focus on his development from a boy with childish beliefs into a wiser adult, with a full awareness of his past mistakes.

The third and last section will deal with the story of Philip Pirrip, known as Pip, and his *Great Expectations*. Pip is the protagonist of another *Bildungsroman* written after *David Copperfield*. Here Dickens attempts are again directed to narrate the apprenticeship of a youthful protagonist, but with the difference that now the danger comes not only from adverse circumstances in the society, but also from a selfish, proud and snob disposition. Buckley affirms:

When he returned to the Bildungsroman as a genre ten years later, he was ready to deal not in wish-fulfillment but in forces precluding a tranquil resolution, in errors of pride and self-interest, far more insidious than the well-intentioned but undisciplined heart.¹¹³

Despite the misfortunes and misunderstandings, Pip will finally have the opportunity to redeem himself, and he does so successfully.

¹¹² From the preface to Charles Dickens, *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, ed. by D. Appleton & Co, 1869

¹¹³ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, pp.42-43

3.1 DICKENS'S CHILDREN

During the nineteenth century, the 'first person' narrative became very popular, due to an increasing interest in the concept of a narrative retrospective pattern. That brings to a series of works which dealt with the young mind's development. The young protagonist was usually male – even though *Jane Eyre* must be cited as a notable exception – and often found himself in an apprenticeship novel¹¹⁴ with confessional elements. The focus on the individual was central to the configuration of the realistic fiction, which became a composition of adventures and personal thoughts of childhood from an adult point of view. This generation gap is fundamental in the exploration of memory as well as the credibility of the story, since the adult's narrating voice and his comments play a salient role in the mediation of the child's innocence.

In Dickens's children we find sometimes an exaggeration of – sometimes idealized – pathos as well as the gloom and the squalor of reality. These emotions flow through the passages of the stories and gather themselves in the constant presence of a connection with Dickens's own self-pity during his early years. It must be said, in fact, that from his past experience, Dickens was able to convey his childhood pains into a general experience for many of his characters, furthermore

the child became for him the symbol of sensitive feelings anywhere in a society maddened with the pursuit of material progress. The novels of Dickens are an account of the plight of human sensibility under the cast-iron shackles of the Victorian world.¹¹⁵

We can read a proof of what Coveney asserts in Chapter L of *Nicholas Nickleby*, where Dickens describes the gipsy children at the Hampton Race:

Even the sunburnt faces of gipsy children, half naked though they be, suggest a drop of comfort. It is a pleasant thing to see that the sun has been there; to know that the air and light are on them every day; to feel that they ARE children, and lead children's lives; that if their pillows be damp, it is with the dews of Heaven, and not with tears; that the limbs of their girls are free, and that they are not crippled by distortions, imposing an unnatural and horrible penance upon their sex; that their lives are spent, from day to day, at least among the waving trees, and not in the midst of dreadful engines which make young children old before they know what childhood is, and give

¹¹⁴ Following the first example of *Bildungsroman* – Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister Apprenticeship* – written in 1795-1796, where the protagonist undertakes a journey of self-realization

¹¹⁵ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p.115

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them the exhaustion and infirmity of age, without, like age, the privilege to die. God send that old nursery tales were true, and that gypsies stole such children by the score! (NN, 493)¹¹⁶

The enthusiasm Dickens puts in this description is impressive: he draws a gap between the gypsies, here considered as the children of mother nature, and the empty children of modern industrial society. As believed by Coveney,

With Dickens's children, we find both the pathos and the idealization – and sometimes, perhaps, the squalid as well. We feel his emotions rush towards the image and accumulate about it, until his children become sometimes no more than the accumulated presence of his own self-pity, idealizing the happiness and security he had lost, proving to himself and the world at large his subsequent 'victimization'.¹¹⁷

Therefore, it could happen that occasionally Dickens's personal experience is voluntarily shifted into a general infant occurrence. "In one sense", Coveney adds, "he (Dickens) continued, throughout his life, to see the world with children's eyes".¹¹⁸



Figure 3.1. Illustration by Fred Bernard. *Dickens at the Blacking Warehouse*. Charles Dickens is here shown as a boy of twelve years of age, working in a factory. Published in "The Leisure Hour. An Illustrated Magazine for Home Reading" ed. W. Stevens, London, 1904. From <<http://www.dickenslondontours.co.uk/secret-lives-of-dickens.htm>>.

¹¹⁶ All quotations to *Nicholas Nickleby* are taken from: Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, M. Ford (ed), New York, Penguin, 1999, and references will be given in the text in parenthesis (NN) after the quotation.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.159

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.160

3.2 TOUCH, SMELL AND SIGHT: THE SENSES IN THE CHILDREN

From his first days, a baby can perceive things and people around him with the help of his senses: in particular through the touch, the smell and the sight. Dickens's children are wisely characterized by their approach to these senses, which help the reader to detect how children were intended to be during the author's age; many examples can be traced in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

David's governess, Pegotty, is often characterised through what the boy remembers of her movement and housework. From the beginning some hints of her strong personality appears from an interesting and concrete simile: "The touch of Peggotty's forefinger as she used to hold it out to me, and of its being roughened by needlework, like a pocket nutmeg-grater".(DC, 12) Pegotty is for David a careful and amiable person, but at the same time, this concrete association lets us know that she is also strong, faithful, devoted to her loved ones and resolute. The image of the nutmeg grater is quite interesting because Dickens makes use of it also in Pip's description of his sister, Mrs Joe:

My sister, Mrs. Joe, with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap. She was tall and bony, and almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops, and having a square impregnable bib in front, that was stuck full of pins and needles. (GE, 7)

But here, the comparison acquires a negative connotation, the roughness is no more a symbol of firmness and tenacity; on the contrary, Mrs Joe's hands as well as her apron demonstrate a strict and rigid discipline, making the boy feel uncomfortable towards the gruff sister and at ease with the affable and kind Joe Gargery. The idea of associating a kind of texture to a person is quite brilliant and demonstrates how vivid and powerful Dickens writing was; David sees Miss Murdstone as "a metallic lady". (DC, 45) Sylvère Monod's study on the subject shows how *David Copperfield* "contains several illustrations of the part played by unconscious sensory association in our psychological life".¹¹⁹ Dickens demonstrates that there can be a link between a place

¹¹⁹ S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p.361

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or an object and a precise occurrence in our life – that admits the presence of hidden connections in an adult mind, which, like flash of insight, derive from a childish experience. To explain myself better, I shall give some examples: when David remembers Pegotty's house and the environment around it he reflects:

I don't know why one slight set of impressions should be more particularly associated with a place than another, though I believe this obtains with most people, in reference especially to the associations of their childhood. I never hear the name, or read the name, of Yarmouth, but I am reminded of a certain Sunday morning on the beach, the bells ringing for church, little Em'ly leaning on my shoulder, Ham lazily dropping stones into the water, and the sun, away at sea, just breaking through the heavy mist, and showing us the ships, like their own shadows. (DC, 39)

David perfectly remembers his infancy experience in Yarmouth through some mental 'pictures' of it. However, Dickens makes use of this psychological memories more than once: while visiting Pegotty's house, David is impressed by a book about the sufferings of the Protestant martyrs; he explains:

I was chiefly edified, I am afraid, by the pictures, which were numerous, and represented all kinds of dismal horrors; but the Martyrs and Peggotty's house have been inseparable in my mind ever since, and are now. (DC, 144)

Or when David sees Agnes for the first time, he immediately associates her to an angelic creature:

I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards. (DC, 217)

But probably the best and most successful example here enlisted, is the one associated with Dora and the flowers of the garden:

The scent of a geranium leaf, at this day, strikes me with a half comical half serious wonder as to what change has come over me in a moment; and then I see a straw hat and blue ribbons, and a quantity of curls, and a little black dog being held up, in two slender arms, against a bank of blossoms and bright leaves. (DC, 385)

The simple olfactory perception is enough to create a contiguity with Dora's image, thus provoking a psychological phenomenon. The perception of odours in a child is amplified because he is basically nearer to the ground, and he can have a more immediate response of the space around him. The child can discern not only the smell

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of the plants and the objects, but also a person instead of another, transforming a sensation into a memory. The olfactory recall can often re-emerge during his growth and adulthood. As Carey reports: "Dickens says that he never forgot the smell of the damp straw on the floor of the stage-coach in which he was sent, as a child, from Rochester to London". and "The smell of the cement used on blacking corks during his days in the warehouse stayed with Dickens so long that as a grown man he would always cross over in order to avoid it",¹²⁰ and his ability to remember places from their smell has been transferred in his little character. Pegotty's storeroom is in David's remembrances:

A dark store-room opens out of it, and that is a place to be run past at night; for I don't know what may be among those tubs and jars and old tea-chests, when there is nobody in there with a dimly-burning light, letting a mouldy air come out of the door, in which there is the smell of soap, pickles, pepper, candles, and coffee, all at one whiff (DC, 13)

And the classroom of the terrible Salem House odour like "mildewed corduroys, sweet apples wanting air, and rotten books", (DC, 74) David remembers also the smell of the parlour during his mother's funeral:

If the funeral had been yesterday, I could not recollect it better. The very air of the best parlour, when I went in at the door, the bright condition of the fire, the shining of the wine in the decanters, the patterns of the glasses and plates, the faint sweet smell of cake, the odour of Miss Murdstone's dress, and our black clothes. (DC, 124)

Finally the sight, the more direct of the senses, helps children to create a complete impression on things and individuals. However, together with the 'real' sight, the child usually develops an internal sight, the imagination, which can be so vivid that he often confuses and mistakes adults with inanimate objects. During his journey on the coach to London, David notices "an elderly lady in a great fur cloak, who looked in the dark more like a haystack than a lady, she was wrapped up to such a degree".(DC, 68) The dangerous convict that Pip meets in the marshes is seen by him as a kind of clock: "Something clicked in his throat, as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike".(GE, 17)

¹²⁰ J. Carey, *op.cit.*, p.132

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It can happen, other times, that the child's mind associates adults with their own animals: David, for example, is deadly terrified by his father-in-law and his huge dog: "I very soon started back from there, for the empty dog-kennel was filled up with a great dog - deep mouthed and black-haired like Him - and he was very angry at the sight of me, and sprang out to get at me".(DC, 41) The sensitivity of children is so deep that they are able to detect the presence of an adult from the sensations they trace in the atmosphere and in the air, even without the help of their sight – when David goes to bed, he clearly feels the Murdstones presence into the house without seeing them: "It appeared to my childish fancy, as I ascended to the bedroom where I had been imprisoned, that they brought a cold blast of air into the house which blew away the old familiar feeling like a feather".(DC, 110)

3.3 PLASTIC CHILDREN AND NATURAL CHILDREN

In his work on Dickens's children, Carey distinguishes between 'plastic children' and 'natural children'. The first one are like dwarfs, like unnatural small adults, who have the same feelings and behaviour of an already grown up child, they often have an infant body but an adult mind and thoughts.¹²¹ The most clear example of 'natural children' are, of course, David and Pip; the difference between them and the so called dwarfs can be analyzed within the theme of death and religion.

Dickens's children express their imagination, giving birth to strange but common opinions about general topics. In this case about death: Pip associates the tombs of his parents to their aspects:

The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "Also Georgiana Wife of the Above," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly (GE, 3)

Even if at first sight the comparison can appear macabre and weird, it is, in a way, extremely credible if we think about a child's mind and the opportunity, or better, the necessity to create a family story. An orphan, in particular, calls for some roots in his past, and if they do not exist, he is allowed to create them with his imagination. David too has a reaction and a behaviour which mirrored the child's desperate search for prestige and dignity, even if it is in the background of his mother's death:

I am sensible of having felt that a dignity attached to me among the rest of the boys, and that I was important in my affliction [...] I remember that this importance was a kind of satisfaction to me, when I walked in the playground that afternoon while the boys were in school. When I saw them glancing at me out of the windows, as they went up to their classes, I felt distinguished, and looked more melancholy, and walked slower. (DC, 118)

David comes into contact with the falsity of the adults' grief, but the confession of having felt this sensation makes him still a child.

'Natural children' are also completely unstirred by religion: when Pip goes to school, the only thing that arouses his curiosity about religion is the fact that the few copies of the Bible available were "speckled all over with ironmould, and having

¹²¹ Ibid., p.136

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various specimens of the insect world smashed between their leaves”.(GE, 67) For little David, religious stories are frightening; as every child, he considers them as fables:

One Sunday night my mother reads to Peggotty and me in there, how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. And I am so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take me out of bed, and show me the quiet churchyard out of the bedroom window, with the dead all lying in their graves at rest, below the solemn moon. (DC, 14)

On the other hand, the plastic children are fervent Christians, in a way that they often have a super sensorial experience with God especially at the moment of their death. One example, in this field, is Little Dick in *Oliver Twist*, who dreams and hopes for a better future: “I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake”.(OT, 49) The innocence and the purity of children make them suitable to receive God’s attentions, as “they could reassure the worried adults with glimpses of eternity”¹²². Paul Dombey’s death is the one of a plastic child – he seems to experience a mystical presence, that brings him towards immortality: “Mama is like you, Floy. I know her by the face! But tell them that the print upon the stairs at school is not divine enough. The light about the head is shining on me as I go”.(DS, 160)

¹²² Ibid., p. 139

3.4 OLIVER TWIST

Oliver Twist is one of the first English novels focused on a child, it was innovative in the way that after the success of the *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens wanted to prove his ability to write a more serious entertainment – which resulted into a social satire. The novel was published in 1838, subtitled *The Parish Boy's Progress*, and is based on the fictional story of an orphan dragged into the miserable life of London criminality.

Among various social themes, what is concretely described in the story is the resentful critique on the Poor Law Amendment Act passed by the Whig government in 1834 which, among other restrictions, refused to help people who could not economically support themselves, unless in the boundary of the workhouses where they paid board and lodging by working hard. Even though the formal aspect seems quite licit, the awful and inhumane conditions established in the workhouses were unbelievable, moreover they did not improve, if anything worsened, the miserable situation of the poor. Oliver is physically presented as

pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference, (OT, 5) enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once- a parish child- the orphan of a workhouse- the humble, half-starved drudge- to be cuffed and buffeted through the world- despised by all, and pitied by none. (OT, 3)

Already from the first pages Dickens insists many times on Oliver's weakness and solitude, moreover when he left the farm

he burst into an agony of childish grief, as the cottage-gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child's heart for the first time. (OT, 9)

And then, after the great offence of 'asking for more', he felt desolation in his prison:

He only cried bitterly all day; and, when the long, dismal night came on, spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching in the corner, tried to sleep: ever and anon waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him. (OT, 14)

In his solitude he becomes an easy prey for the racketeers Fagin and Sikes. According to Coveney, Dickens tries to convey the concrete representations in the book, into a

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moral significance: “ In *Oliver Twist* we have the first appearance of the symbolic technique which he brought to such achievement in his later work. The moral intention of the novel is conveyed in the selection of concrete imagery”.¹²³ To do so, he uses the opposite spheres of the cold dark winter, in contrast with the warm sunlight which gives life; Coveney takes as example the period before Oliver goes to live with the Maylies: the atmosphere is that of winter:

The night was very dark. A damp mist rose from the river, and the marshy ground about; and spread itself over the dreary fields. It was piercing cold, too; all was gloomy and black. (OT, 156)

The night was bitter cold. The snow lay on the ground, frozen into a hard thick crust, [...] Bleak, dark, and piercing cold, it was a night for the well-housed and fed to draw round the bright fire and thank God they were at home; and for the homeless, starving wretch to lay him down and die. (OT, 165)

The same sensation of being surrounded by obscurity and enemies can be found when Oliver is captured by Sikes:

Weak with recent illness; stupefied by the blows and the suddenness of the attack; terrified by the fierce growling of the dog, and the brutality of the man; overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be; what could one poor child do? Darkness had set in; it was a low neighbourhood; no help was near; resistance was useless. In another moment he was dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts (OT, 108)

Or :

The air grew colder, as day came slowly on; and the mist rolled along the ground like a dense cloud of smoke. The grass was wet; the pathways, and low places, were all mire and water; the damp breath of an unwholesome wind went languidly by, with a hollow moaning. Still, Oliver lay motionless and insensible on the spot where Sikes had left him. (OT, 206)

All these terrible images and abandonment find their opposite in the world of the Maylies and the Brownlows – the house where Oliver is recovered is a pleasant place: “In a handsome room: though its furniture had rather the air of old-fashioned comfort than of modern elegance: there sat two ladies at a well-spread breakfast-table”. (OT, 214) And the kindness of Oliver’s benefactors affects also their cottage near Chertsey, and here, the old days of Dickens’s infancy in Chatham re-emerge, as to create a sharing of experience with his young character.

¹²³ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p. 129

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Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquillity, the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! [...] It was a lovely spot to which they repaired. Oliver, whose days had been spent among squalid crowds, and in the midst of noise and brawling, seemed to enter on a new existence there. The rose and honeysuckle clung to the cottage walls; [...] and the garden-flowers perfumed the air with delicious odours. (OT, 237)

And when Sunday came, how differently the day was spent from any way in which he had ever spent it yet! and how happily too; like all the other days in that most happy time! There was the little church, in the morning, with the green leaves fluttering at the windows: the birds singing without, [...] The poor people were so neat and clean, and knelt so reverently in prayer, that it seemed a pleasure, not a tedious duty their assembling there together". (OT, 238)

Dickens lets Oliver express what is happening around him through his young visual awareness of: so that we can enter another dimension of reality, typical of children:

He soon fell into a gentle doze, from which he was awakened by the light of a candle: which, being brought near the bed, showed him a gentleman with a very large and loud-ticking gold watch in his hand, who felt his pulse, and said he was a great deal better. (OT, 77)

Or when Oliver meets the magistrate in order to be apprenticed to the chimney-sweeper:

Oh, is this the boy?" said the old gentleman. "This is him, sir," replied Mr. Bumble. "Bow to the magistrate, my dear". Oliver roused himself, and made his best obeisance. He had been wondering, with his eyes fixed on the magistrates' powder, whether all boards were born with that white stuff on their heads, and were boards from thenceforth on that account. (OT, 19)

But it is the horror of Oliver's childhood that strikes more than other examples; when he is chased and hunted by the enraged crowd, he lives a nightmare:

"Stop thief! Stop thief!" There is a passion (r)for hunting something deeply implanted in the human breast. One wretched breathless child, panting with exhaustion; terror in his looks; agony in his eyes; large drops of perspiration streaming down his face; strains every nerve to make head upon his pursuers; and as they follow on his track, and gain upon him every instant, they hail his decreasing strength with still louder shouts, and whoop and scream with joy. [...] Stopped at last! A clever blow. He is down upon the pavement; and the crowd eagerly gather around him: each new comer, jostling and struggling with the others to catch a glimpse. [...] Oliver lay, covered with mud and dust, and bleeding from the mouth, looking wildly round upon the heap of faces that surrounded him. (OT, 67)

3.4.1 OLIVER, THE NATURAL CHILD

In *Oliver Twist*, we are not surprised by the innocence of the protagonist. From the beginning he is an innocent soul and a genuine spirit. Nonetheless, the fact of growing up in a workhouse where he is barbarously treated, should let him desire the human company and the necessity of the appreciation from external people to determine his self value. His wishes should grow with the age and his appetites would go beyond life's basic necessities, all combined with a scornful indifference to the suffering of others. But this does not happen: Oliver is the true embodiment of Dickens's belief in natural goodness.

Dickens's idea of the novel was basically to demonstrate the assumption that the good instincts can survive through every hostile circumstance, hence Oliver represents the "ideal and incorruptible innocence"¹²⁴ proclaimed by Dickens and Rousseau. Barbara Hardy affirms that in *Oliver Twist* Dickens "tells a truth about a death struggle between nature and nurture, self and society".¹²⁵ But Marcus adds that "there is nothing in his experience to account for what he is",¹²⁶ we must assume that Oliver is good because of his nature; even if only a child, he meets the canons of Rousseau's natural man.

From the very beginning, Oliver leads a solitary existence forced by the death of his mother upon her giving birth to him. With her death he becomes a parish child who spends his life in a workhouse, destined to live a childhood of isolation and loneliness in places "where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years"(OT, 9) Oliver's expulsion from the workhouse takes him out of his seclusion but places him in the clutches of Fagin. He succeeds in escaping the first time and he experiments the first kind, disinterested affection of his life from Mr. Brownlow. But unfortunately Oliver is captured once again by Nancy and Sikes and comes back to Fagin's thieves gang. Oliver receives, as a punishment for his escape, an isolated

¹²⁴ S. Marcus, *op.cit.*, p. 79

¹²⁵ B. Hardy, *Charles Dickens : The Writer and his Work*, Windsor, Berkshire, England : Profile Books, 1983, p. 33

¹²⁶ S. Marcus, *op.cit.*, pp. 79-80

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confinement, in the den for a whole week, in order to prepare “his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place” in this way Fagin could “slowly instill into his [Oliver’s] soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it”.(OT, 120) Oliver, however, takes refuge and consolation in prayer, and during the period spent with Fagin, he asks that: “if any aid were to be raised up for a poor outcast boy, who had never known the love of friends or kindred, it might come to him now: when, desolate and deserted, he stood alone in the midst of wickedness and guilt”.(OT, 130) These experiences of enforced loneliness, during his childhood, impress in him the desperate aspiration to obtain love and family; his imagination allows him to escape from the harsh reality and demonstrates us the innate goodness of Oliver’s soul. Fortunately for Oliver, his own natural virtue and his brief experience of compassion and friendship with Mr. Brownlow reinforced him against the continuous confrontation with the criminal world of Fagin and his gang.

Oliver possesses, indeed, many of Rousseau’s natural man characteristics. Formerly I have mentioned his innocence, a quality which is revealed mostly when Oliver is compared with Fagin and his gang members. Fagin claims of teaching him the necessary precepts for getting along in the world, but Oliver’s natural chaste interpretation and righteousness show his lack of knowledge, for example, of criminal terminology such as “prig” (OT, 116) and “scragging” (OT, 118) But more than these signals, what is significant is Oliver’s absolute horror when he discovers the reality of Fagin’s intentions: out of the den, Oliver is completely unprepared and shocked by what he beholds:

What was Oliver’s horror and alarm as he stood a few paces off, looking on with his eyelids as wide open as they would possibly go, to see the Dodger plunge his hand into the old gentleman’s pocket, and draw from thence a handkerchief! To see him hand the same to Charley Bates; and finally to behold them, both, running away round the corner at full speed! In an instant the whole mystery of the handkerchiefs, and the watches, and the jewels, and the Jew, rushed upon the boy’s mind. He stood, for a moment, with the blood so tingling through all his veins from terror, that he felt as if he were in a burning fire; then, confused and frightened, he took to his heels; and, not knowing what he did, made off as fast as he could lay his feet to the ground. (OT, 58)

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Moreover, later, in Chapter XXII, Oliver is forcedly involved again in a criminal action by Sikes, but he seems to be almost as astounded and astonished as he was during the previous theft, which demonstrates that he remains as innocent as the day he first arrived in London:

And now, for the first time, Oliver, well-nigh mad with grief and terror, saw that housebreaking and robbery, if not murder, were the objects of the expedition. He clasped his hands together, and involuntarily uttered a subdued exclamation of horror. A mist came before his eyes; the cold sweat stood upon his ashy face; his limbs failed him; and he sunk upon his knees. (OT, 143)

Oliver's naivety manifests itself in his inexperience of depravity and criminal deeds, along with his impulsive reaction of surprise when he experiments them. Despite the efforts of Fagin to corrupt him, his innocence remains intact throughout the novel.

There are many marks in the plot that testify Oliver's natural characteristics. Oliver yearns for sincere love and a comfortable home, since he never had the opportunity to enjoy them. Anyway, apart from the primary necessities, he does not manifest any desire for richness or prestige, even more if that means to sacrifice his ethical principles. The Dodger assures Oliver that under the protection of Fagin, he can make his "fortun' out of hand" and Charley insists, "And so be able to retire on your property, and do the genteel: as I mean to, in the very next leap-year but four that ever comes, and the forty-second Tuesday in Trinity-week", but Oliver answers: "I don't like it [...] I wish they would let me go. I—I—would rather go".(OT, 117)

Even if we know from the beginning that Oliver was not taught to pray, he demonstrates some inclination towards it. It seems that, although he wishes human company, he perceives immediately that the fellowship offered by Fagin and his boys is anything but sincere and honest, he therefore prefers the hidden world of his prayers to the corruption of the criminals. At the end of the novel, we find out that Oliver's mother had a "gentle heart, and noble nature", (OT, 351) just like the charitable humanity of his aunt Rose Maylie. The explanation Dickens gives for Oliver's exemplary behaviour lies, therefore, in his innate nature and in a gentle heredity from his relatives. Evidences of Oliver's loving kindness can be seen throughout the novel in his display of honesty and compassion, not to mention his great pity towards the others. One of his playmates at the workhouse is sickly Little Dick. At first Dick shows

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sympathy for Oliver, and offers him the first blessing he “had ever heard invoked upon his head” (OT, 43), but later, when Oliver returns to his home town with Rose, Mrs. Maylie, Mrs. Bedwin, and Mr. Losberne, he remembers the blessing that Dick had given him, and wanted to do something for his friend: “we’ll—we’ll take him away from here, and have him clothed and taught, and send him to some quiet country place where he may grow strong and well”.(OT, 348) Unfortunately Oliver’s compassionate plans for Dick have come too late. But if Oliver’s care for Dick is praiseworthy, the one he shows towards Fagin is remarkable. After Fagin is arrested and imprisoned, Mr. Brownlow takes Oliver to visit him in the condemned cell at Newgate. Oliver wishes to say a prayer for Fagin, and to remain with Fagin until the next morning in order to soothe his fear, but Fagin only wants Oliver’s help to escape. In spite of everything, Oliver finally prays for him: “Oh, God forgive this wretched man!” (OT, 364) and leaves.



Figure 3.2. Illustration by George Cruikshank. *Oliver asking for more*. From *Oliver Twist*. 1837-1839. On line source <<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/lit/oliver.shtml>>

3.5 DAVID COPPERFIELD

Dickens was so attached to his creation of David Copperfield that for many scholars the boy occupies a unique place in the author's production and life. Many features of David in the novel, in fact, are extremely close to Dickens's experience of life, from childhood to his career as a writer. As David himself admits:

I worked early and late, patiently and hard. I wrote a Story, with a purpose growing, not remotely, out of my experience, and sent it to Traddles, and he arranged for its publication very advantageously for me; and the tidings of my growing reputation began to reach me from travellers whom I encountered by chance. (DC, 796)

According to Newsom: "The turn to psychology and to the problem of growing up remains apparent, for *David Copperfield* is a classic *Bildungsroman* – perhaps the classic example of such in British fiction".¹²⁷ In spite of the numerous similarities existing between Charles and David, Buckley specifies:

though their lives touch at many points, David Copperfield is clearly not Charles Dickens. Neither as children nor as adults, except perhaps in their habits of observation, are they at all alike in temperament.¹²⁸

This statement is a confirmation of what Robert Hamilton asserted earlier in an issue of *The Dickensian*¹²⁹: "Of course, the adult David is completely unlike the adult Dickens, as unlike as a lamb to a fiery steed".¹³⁰ If we follow this idea, David appears more like a counterpart of Dickens: after all, David is a gentle and quiet person, due to the fact that even though he suffers miseries and mistreatments as a child, he is able to go beyond them and leave the pains behind – David's maturity leads him towards a positive direction.

¹²⁷ R. Newsom. *op.cit.*, p.109

¹²⁸ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.33

¹²⁹ *The Dickensian* is a journal, founded in 1905 and now edited by Professor Malcom Andrews, which publishes articles of literary criticism written by scholars from all over the world. The Journal is published three times a year, and deals particularly with articles about Dickens's life, characters and works

¹³⁰ R. Hamilton, "Dickens's Favourite Child", *The Dickensian*, June XLV, Staples, Leslie C. (ed.) London: The Dickens Fellowship, 1949, p.141



I make myself known to my Aunt

Figure 3.3. Illustration by H.K. Browne (also known as "Phiz") *I make myself known to my Aunt*. From *David Copperfield*. Sept 1849. Scanned image and text George P. Ladow, from <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dc/11.html>>

3.5.1 FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

The early chapters of the novel are dominated by “I” and “my”, underlining the centrality of the protagonist in the action. But later, in the last chapters, David becomes the spectator of what is happening and revolving around him, so that the reader, together with David, discovers that every character and circumstance has a final link and a role in the development of the adult. Buckley affirms: “Like Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, David presents his autobiography as the product of a powerful memory working over his experience from childhood to early maturity”.¹³¹ The autobiographical element recurs in some flashbacks narrated by David himself, one example is when he understands that Mr. Murdstone and Mr. Quinion are determining his destiny and his departure to send him in the harsh reality of the work in a factory:

I now approach a period of my life, which I can never lose the remembrance of, while I remember anything: and the recollection of which has often, without my invocation, come before me like a ghost, and haunted happier times. (DC, 146)

or during the storm that caused Steerforth’s death:

For years after it occurred, I dreamed of it often. I have started up so vividly impressed by it, that its fury has yet seemed raging in my quiet room, in the still night.[...] As plainly as I behold what happened, I will try to write it down. I do not recall it, but see it done; for it happens again before me. (DC, 765)

Buckley observes: “The strength of the memories derives from the vividness of the original sense impressions; what has been observed intensely becomes forever a part of the observer”, moreover “Such moments of recollection are virtually “spots of time”, suggesting to David a unity, or at least a continuity amid all the diversity of his experience”.¹³²

David’s process of maturity is based on his learning to control his emotions in order to reach a balanced equilibrium in his heart. Surely, at first, David’s ardour and feelings gain the upper hand on diplomacy and prudence – in particular early in the novel when, as a boy, David bites Mr. Murdstone full of hatred. While he becomes a

¹³¹ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.35

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp.35-36

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young man, he plunges into the dissipation of alcohol and money, moreover he terribly falls in love and has an obsession over Dora. However, his marriage with the childish Dora will not lead to a happy union, David finds himself embroiled in a relationship without mutual exchange: Dora does not mature in a wiser woman and day by day reveals her real nature, which is incongruent with David's necessities. Despite the incomprehension, they both love each other, but this is not enough for David; he still considers himself guilty of having mistaken true love:

I was a boyish husband as to years. I had known the softening influence of no other sorrows or experiences than those recorded in these leaves. If I did any wrong, as I may have done much, I did it in mistaken love, and in my want of wisdom. I write the exact truth. It would avail me nothing to extenuate it now. (DC, 629)

Before David can understand his priorities and the meaning of an unconditional love, he must learn to control his impulsiveness and master his feelings. When he is finally able to put forward his mind and reason, he manages to identify his true love for Agnes: "I had always felt my weakness, in comparison with her constancy and fortitude; and now I felt it more and more".(DC, 797)

It must be noticed that the entrance to adulthood of the young David is marked by a period of isolation after Dora's and Steerforth's deaths. David decides to wander alone for three years through Italy and Switzerland in order to "get a better understanding of [himself] and be a better man", (DC, 797) and it is as if he returns to be once again the disconsolate orphan "bearing [his] painful load through all, and hardly conscious of the objects as they fade before me. Listlessness to everything, but brooding sorrow, was the night that fell on my undisciplined heart" (DC, 793) Nonetheless he is no more just the shape of an immature and naïf child, but an adult who tries to find answers and distraction from his past life experiences and sorrows. Buckley observes:

'Absence', the chapter devoted to his three-years exile, differs in style from the rest of the narrative; it is the one section given over to sustained analysis and introspection, a subjective, almost lyrical account of a crisis which in accordance with Dickens's working notes, must be "dreamily described".¹³³

¹³³ Ibid., p.40

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As a matter of fact, David himself explains: "There are some dreams that can only be imperfectly and vaguely described; and when I oblige myself to look back on this time of my life, I seem to be recalling such a dream".(DC, 793)

David continues his pilgrimage to manhood just with sad memories, sorrows and regrets, until, one evening, he reaches a small village among the Alpine valley:

In the course of my descent to it, by the winding track along the mountain-side, from which I saw it shining far below, I think some long-unwonted sense of beauty and tranquillity, some softening influence awakened by its peace, moved faintly in my breast".(DC, 794)

It is for him a turning point, an awakening of his mind: "I remember pausing once, with a kind of sorrow that was not all oppressive, not quite despairing. I remember almost hoping that some better change was possible within me".(DC, 794) Buckley underlines the similarity with "Wordsworth's epiphany at the Simplon Pass", David's transformation "makes him responsive, with a quite Wordsworthian reverence, to the singing of shepherds as if he were hearing the voice of 'great Nature'".¹³⁴ The experience is so powerful that he is finally able to disclose his feelings to the world by crying profusely for his little wife's death.

The fulfilment of David's mind is the realization of what is really important for him, and what he has lost during his childhood:

I cannot so completely penetrate the mystery of my own heart, as to know when I began to think that I might have set its earliest and brightest hopes on Agnes. I cannot say at what stage of my grief it first became associated with the reflection, that, in my wayward boyhood, I had thrown away the treasure of her love. (DC, 796)

Agnes is his necessary correlative, she can give him solidity and affection, "in marriage to Agnes, David achieves the integration of personality to which the hero in the novel of youth typically aspires".¹³⁵

From the very beginning of the story the gender theme attracts the attention: David's sex is questioned by his Aunt Betsey and his young mother. Aunt Betsey arrived to assist at David's birth, hoping that the baby will be a girl, in fact she already named 'her' Betsey Trotwood Copperfield. The Aunt's projects, anyway, are

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.41

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.42

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benevolent; she only wants to protect her future niece “from reposing any foolish confidences where they are not deserved. I must make that *my care*”.(DC, 7) But when the baby turns to be a boy, she leaves the house silently: “She vanished like a discontented fairy; or like one of those supernatural beings, whom it was popularly supposed I was entitled to see; and never came back any more”.(DC, 12) She will return only when poor David escapes from London and the warehouse’s life, in order to search for any help from his aunt - from that moment she becomes David’s god-mother.

The motif of gender emerges also when David is sent to a boarding school by Mr. Murdstone. At Salem House, David meets James Steerforth, a young popular boy who takes David under his protection. David really gets on well with him, and Steerforth too; he even gives David a feminine nickname: “I take a degree!” cried Steerforth. ‘Not !! my dear Daisy - will you mind my calling you Daisy?’”(DC, 284) Steerforth and Aunt Betsey, during the novel, reveal their real self: Steerforth, despite his good presentation, demonstrates to be not so tender and thoughtful, Aunt Betsey, on the contrary, has a quick and emotionless performance at first, but then she reveals to be careful and attached to David. A convincing model of a child-parent relationship can be found also in the bond between David and the Micawbers. However, some aspects of the ‘young Dickens’s can be traced also in the figure of Wilkins Micawber Junior: the boy is the older son of Mr. Micawber, and he is placed in the same position Dickens had when he was 12. The young Micawber is described thus:

I had the pleasure, on this occasion, of renewing the acquaintance of Master Micawber, whom I found a promising boy of about twelve or thirteen, very subject to that restlessness of limb which is not an unfrequent phenomenon in youths of his age. (DC, 515)

To conclude, the preface to *David Copperfield* reveals some hidden aspects of the author’s work, he confesses his disappointment and satisfactions:

My mind is so divided between pleasure and regret - pleasure in the achievement of a long design, regret in the separation from many companions - that I am in danger of wearying the reader whom I love, with personal confidences, and private emotions.

Dickens expresses himself, remembering his creatures – his children:

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It would concern the reader little, perhaps, to know, how sorrowfully the pen is laid down at the close of a two-years' imaginative task; or how an Author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world, when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him for ever. (DC, Preface)

It is clear that the strongest father-son relationship of the novel is the one between the protagonist and his author.

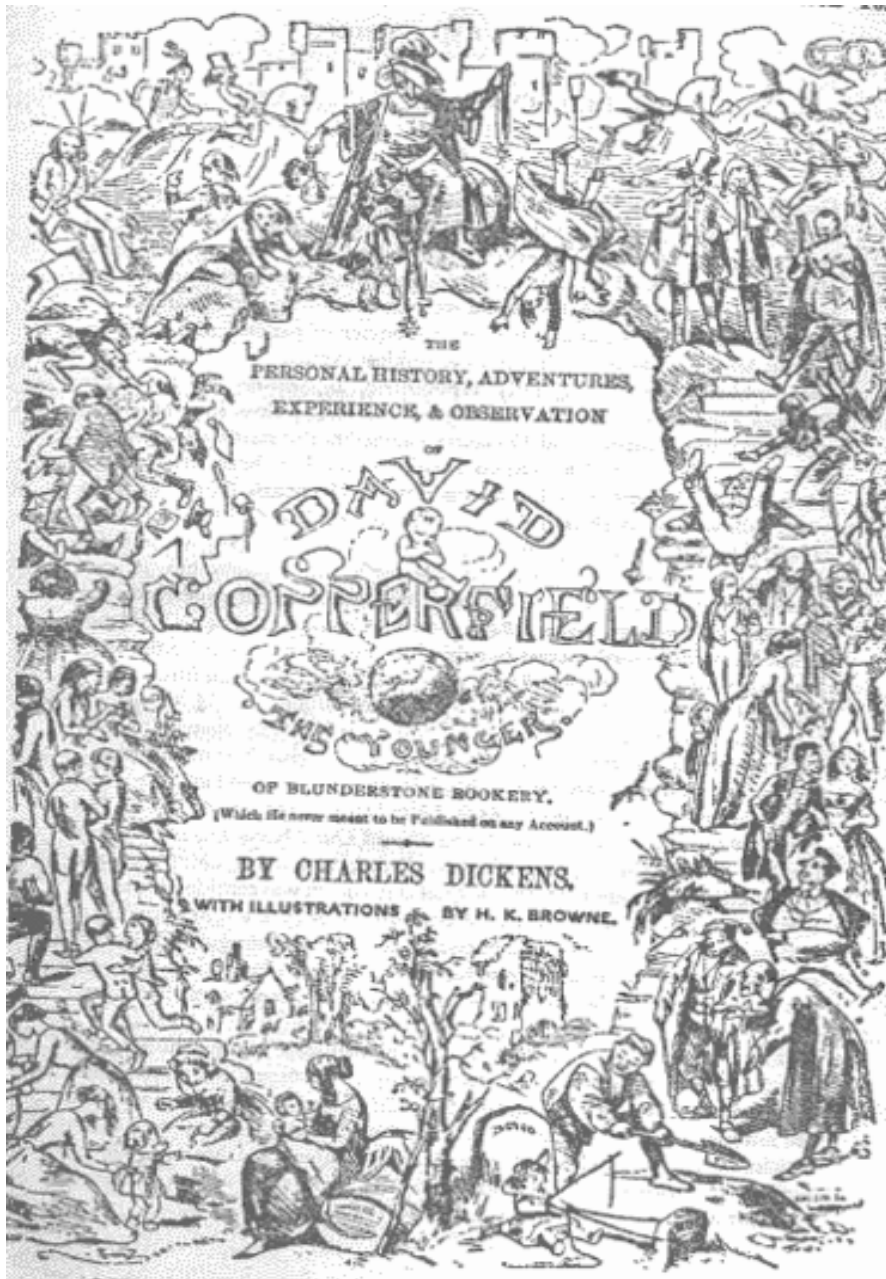


Figure 3.4. Cover, with illustrations by H.K. Browne (also known as “Phiz”), for the serial publication of *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences, & Observation of David Copperfield the Younger*, London: Bradbury & Evans, 1849-1850. From <<http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/rarebook/exhibitions/dickens/24-david-copperfield.htm>>

3.6: PIP AND HIS GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Just before the publication of *Great Expectations*, in 1960, Dickens told Foster:

The book will be written in the first person throughout, and during the first three weekly numbers you will find the hero to be a boy-child, like David. Then he will be apprentice. [...] To be quite sure I had fallen into no unconscious repetitions, I read David Copperfield again the other day, and was affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe.¹³⁶

Philip "Pip" Pirrip is one of the few Dickens characters who develops from a natural child to a corrupted man, and into a civilized adult in front of the reader's eyes. As we have already noticed, Dickens's children are often unaffected by the forces of corruption, one clear example is *Oliver Twist*, anyhow, like *A Christmas Carol*, *Great Expectations* is eventually a story of redemption, and – to be so – it needs a protagonist who must be at first civilized and contaminated by the human vices and deficiencies.

The whole narration can be divided into three parts: the first one presents an innocent protagonist removed by his Eden world because of mysterious great expectations, the second section is characterized by Pip's corruption in the city, together with his delusion, the third and last part presents the privation of wealth but the restoration of Pip's moral integrity. The adult Pip tells his story in retrospect, therefore he is able to give the reader a deep awareness and understanding of the corruptive process that takes place within him. Hardy makes clear that Pip's corruption "is shown from the inside, in a confessional self-analysis in which he bares his secret life and its causality [...] Pip is too clearly and completely aware of the social and emotional forces that have made him what he is",¹³⁷ and Buckley affirms: "Like David, Pip, in telling his story, has the virtues of Dickens the novelist; but unlike David, who is relatively reticent, Pip in his acute self-analysis reveals much of the temper of Dickens the man".¹³⁸

¹³⁶ C. Dickens, *The letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Water Dexter, Bloomsbury (London): The Nonesuch Press, 1937-1938, p. 186

¹³⁷ B. Hardy, *op.cit.*, pp. 84-85

¹³⁸ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.44

Many settings in *Great Expectations* resemble the ones where Dickens the child lived. For example Pip's village can be Cooling with St James church and its churchyard, the neighbouring town is Rochester, and the derelict ships were the prison ships Dickens could see in Catham.

3.6.1 PIP'S INNOCENCE

At the beginning of the story, Pip is presented in a quite comic vein: his ignorance and innocence are displayed against a strange unforeseen episode that life has prepared for him – a meeting with a dangerous escapee – as Monod reports:

His convict has threatened him, in case the boy betrayed him, with the visitation of a certain young man who eats up little boys' livers. Pip believes he sees the young man in question: "It's the young man!" I thought, feeling my heart shoot as I identified him. I dare say I should have felt a pain in my liver, too, if I had known where it was.¹³⁹ (GE, 16)

Pip's ingenuity and ignorance provokes a sense of amusement and compassion in the reader. The same sensation arises when his sister sentences: "Ask no questions, and you'll be told no lies". And Pip's comment on this statement is: "It was not very polite to herself, I thought, to imply that I should be told lies by her, even if I did ask questions. But she never was polite, unless there was company".(GE, 13)

Pip's process of degradation does not begin with the theft of some food and a bottle of brandy for the mysterious escaped convict in the marshes, it already begins from his birth and the moment in which he had been entrusted with his sister Mrs. Joe Gargery. From that very moment he develops a self concept determined by the way the others treat him; he affirms:

My sister's bringing up had made me sensitive. In the little world in which children have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice. It may be only small injustice that the child can be exposed to; but the child is small, and its world is small, and its rocking-horse stands as many hands high, according to scale, as a big-boned Irish hunter. Within myself, I had sustained, from my babyhood, a perpetual conflict with injustice. I had known, from the time when I could speak, that my sister, in her capricious and violent coercion, was unjust to me. [...] Through all my punishments, disgraces, fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances, I had nursed this assurance; and to my communing so much

¹³⁹ S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 480

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with it, in a solitary and unprotected way, I in great part refer the fact that I was morally timid and very sensitive. (GE, 57)

Pip's existence is seen through his eyes as an inconvenient event: "I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born, in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends".(GE, 21) Pip knows perfectly that he will never be able to earn his sister's approval and respect, for this reason, Joe becomes for him the only anchor he can rely on, however, even the love he receives from Joe and the value Joe places on their friendship will not be enough to defeat his constant maturation. His fears of telling Joe about the secret meeting with the convict arise from the idea that the blacksmith will judge him badly, and most of all, from the fright to lose the only sincere friendship he has: "I mistrusted that if I did, he would think me worse than I was. The fear of losing Joe's confidence, and of thenceforth sitting in the chimney-corner at night staring drearily at my for ever lost companion and friend, tied up my tongue". (GE, 37)



Figure 3.5. Illustration by F. W. Pailthorpe. *The Terrible Stranger in the Churchyard*. From Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Garnett edition, facing p. 2.1900. Scanned image and text George P. Ladow, from <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/pailthorpe/1.html>>.

3.6.2 PIP'S CORRUPTION

When Pip leaves home to enter the big, real world, he is well determined to establish his self value by the response he receives from others, and he starts from the impressive Satis House. The first impression Pip has on the charming Estella is of a “proud” and a “very insulting” girl, still he is deeply concerned about her judgement and criticism: for example when she shows derision for his “coarse hands” and “thick boots”, he begins to be influenced by her remarks: “I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it”.(GE, 55)

The effect of the coarse observation continues later, Pip reflects:

I took the opportunity of being alone in the court-yard, to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. My opinion of those accessories was not favourable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages. I determined to ask Joe why he had ever taught me to call those picture-cards, Jacks, which ought to be called knaves. I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too. (GE, 56)

And even when the protagonist leaves the House, he is still overwhelmed by his thoughts, more and more convinced of his poor status:

I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way. (GE, 59)

Together with Pip's dissatisfaction of himself, it can be observed that the young boy becomes, with the time, ashamed of Joe and his natural roughness. When Joe accompanies Pip to Satis House, Pip confesses: “I am afraid I was ashamed of the dear good fellow—I *know* I was ashamed of him—when I saw that Estella stood at the back of Miss Havisham's chair, and that her eyes laughed mischievously”.(GE, 92) In this episode, Joe represents the life Pip wants to repudiate, what is more, he fears that Estella could find out about his work as apprentice in the forge:

What I dreaded was, that in some unlucky hour I, being at my grimiest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge. I was haunted by the fear that she would, sooner or later, find me out, with a black face and hands, doing the coarsest part of my work, and would exult over me and despise me. (GE, 98)

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Joe Gargery is portrayed as an eternal child, he resembles in some traits Mr. Dick in *David Copperfield*, because he has conserved his childish innocent heart and immature brain in an adult body; as Monod notices: “The child Pip is for him an ideal playfellow. But when Pip becomes a man, poor Joe, who remains just as childish as ever, is outdistanced, dismayed, and left alone”. However, the reader’s sympathy never leaves this character, because: “Dickens has succeed both in making the reader aware of Joe’s sincere and pitiable desolation and in conveying the drollery of the paradoxical situation thus created”.¹⁴⁰ Yet, Joe’s role in the novel is something more than an entertaining device, he represents the voice of the conscience: he gives advice to the young Pip, even if with plain and rough words, which are based on common sense and frankness; one example can be the disclosure of Pip’s lies to Joe – the blacksmith answered:

Lookee here, Pip, at what is said to you by a true friend. Which this to you the true friend say. If you can't get to be oncommon through going straight, you'll never get to do it through going crooked. So don't tell no more on 'em, Pip, and live well and die happy. (GE, 65)

Pip perfectly knows that Joe is right, and follows his advice without hesitations, nevertheless he becomes aware, with the years, that Joe is stuck in his habits and in his forge, thus bringing Pip to judge badly his childhood best friend. Monod gathers: “The most significant moral theme of the novel may well be Pip’s inward struggle, when he is caught between his love for Joe and his yearning to rise into a social sphere to which Joe will never have access”.¹⁴¹ His endurance in that poor world of the smithy, really consumes Pip’s soul and destroys any possible future prospect: “After that, when we went in to supper, the place and the meal would have a more homely look than ever, and I would feel more ashamed of home than ever, in my own ungracious breast”. (GE, 98)

The embarrassment caused by Joe and the life he represents persist also when Pip discovers his ‘great expectations’ and goes to London. While he is planning Joe’s visit to London, he admits his discomfort towards the uneasy event:

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p.480

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p.481

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Let me confess exactly, with what feelings I looked forward to Joe's coming. Not with pleasure, though I was bound to him by so many ties; no; with considerable disturbance, some mortification, and a keen sense of incongruity. If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money. (GE, 199)

When Joe visits Pip in London, Pip is highly condemnatory of

his clumsy manner of coming up-stairs – his state boots being always too big for him – and by the time it took him to read the names on the other floors in the course of his ascent. When at last he stopped outside our door, I could hear his finger tracing over the painted letters of my name, and I afterwards distinctly heard him breathing in at the keyhole". (GE, 200)

Pip later will realize that his concern about the others' response of has caused him to reject the one who means the most to him, and that will bring him to look back on his feelings and priorities.

The same redemption Pip has towards Joe, occurs when Pip discovers that Magwitch is his benefactor. At first Pip is alarmed by his revelation and tries to refuse that troublesome idea which could be change his life forever; until he detects his real feelings in the eyes of his friend: "Enough, that I saw my own feelings reflected in Herbert's face, and, not least among them, my repugnance towards the man who had done so much for me". (GE, 311)

Although Pip continues to be anxious about the others' opinion of him, during the days spent in London, he has developed a personal image of himself which has taken a more prominent position. It must be said, however that hints at his ambition and will to be rich and wealthy existed already before his arrival in the city; when he is still a child he declares to Biddy and Joe his ambitions to be a scholar and a gentleman. Furthermore, after his meeting with Estella, his aspirations increase and are centred upon her and the impression he could give her – his expectations of becoming a gentleman are, in substance, projected towards the conquest of Estella.



Figure 3.6. Illustration by John McLenan. *"Pip, how are you, Pip?"* From Dickens's *Great Expectations*, *Harper's Weekly* 5 (23 March 1861) Scanned image by Philip V. Allingham, from <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/mclenan/25.html>>

When Pip is ready to leave for London, he immediately understands the importance of his privilege and consider the people of his village with commiseration and pity; he thinks:

As I passed the church, I felt a sublime compassion for the poor creatures who were destined to go there, Sunday after Sunday, all their lives through, and to lie obscurely at last among the low green mounds. I promised myself that I would do something for them one of these days, and formed a plan in outline for bestowing a dinner of roast-

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beef and plum-pudding, a pint of ale, and a gallon of condescension, upon everybody in the village. (GE, 133)

Pip even manifests his will “to do something for Joe” even though “it would have been much more agreeable if he had been better qualified for a rise in station”. (GE, 134)

When Magwitch reveals his identity as Pip’s benefactor, Pip refuses to embrace him, yelling:

Stay! Keep off! If you are grateful to me for what I did when I was a little child, I hope you have shown your gratitude by mending your way of life. If you have come here to thank me, it was not necessary. Still, however you have found me out, there must be something good in the feeling that has brought you here, and I will not repulse you; but surely you must understand that – I –.(GE, 289)

Pip later reveals to Miss Havisham and Estella his discovery: “I have found out who my patron is. It is not a fortunate discovery, and is not likely ever to enrich me in reputation, station, fortune, anything”.(GE, 328) Although Pip eventually recognises some gratitude towards Magwitch, he is however concerned uniquely about his selfish pride seriously damaged by the unexpected revelation of his benefactor, it can be noticed that Pip completely forget that the convict had started to take care of him already from the beginning, when, in the marshes, he assumes guilt for the theft in the larder. Grahame Smith explains Pip’s repugnance in this manner:

Pip fears Magwitch as only the insecurely established parvenu can fear the criminal outcast. Despite his veneer of culture and poise, his class position is so uncertain that it can be threatened by the merest taint of the socially unacceptable.¹⁴²

Pride changes into superiority when Joe, Biddy, and Magwitch are taken in consideration, but it reaches his higher point in Pip’s efforts to prove the superiority over Bentley Drummle. The reason for his aversion lies primarily in the competition for Estella. Pip starts to feel jealous simply because he knows that Drummle is “actually the next heir but one to a baronetcy”,(GE, 175) he does not imagine his connection with Estella. But when he discovers that the two know each other, Pip announces with envy: “I cannot adequately express what pain it gave me to think that Estella should show any favour to a contemptible, clumsy, sulky booby, so very far below the average”.(GE, 282) He tries to convince Estella of Drummle’s inferiority by telling her

¹⁴² G. Smith, *Dickens, Money and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968 p.178

that he is “a deficient, illtempered, lowering, stupid fellow” and by adding, “You know he has nothing to recommend him but money, and a ridiculous roll of addle-headed predecessors; now, don’t you?”.(GE, 284) Unfortunately his attempts to dissuade Estella result completely ineffective, Pip is forced to leave with his pride and love hopes fallen into pieces.

3.6.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF MONEY

For Pip, money is mainly the means to secure a good reputation and respect, and with money wealth he can also have Estella. But once he has got the opportunity to live in richness and wealth, he admits: “I soon contracted expensive habits, and began to spend an amount of money that within a few short months I should have thought almost fabulous”.(GE, 186-187) He settled in Barnard’s Inn, where: “I had begun to be always decorating the chambers in some quite unnecessary and inappropriate way or other, and very expensive those wrestles with Barnard proved to be”.(GE, 199) He is guilty of having involved his friend Herbert in that world of luxury:

My lavish habits led his easy nature into expenses that he could not afford, corrupted the simplicity of his life, and disturbed his peace with anxieties and regrets”, moreover he joins the Finches of the Grove, a club whose members used to spend “their money foolishly. (GE, 249)

Pip’s ambitions bring him to wear a mask over his real feelings in order to protect himself from the harsh reality; one example of his disguise is when Pip visits Miss Havisham for the first time: she appears to him as a solitary witch, even though just some years later she becomes his godmother.

But it is Estella who strikes his feelings more than others. She treats him with uncommon cruelty and derision because of his humble aspect and poor origins, the boy is reduced to tears; however, after noticing that in Estella’s eyes there is a “quick delight in having been the cause of them”, (GE, 57) he refuses to cry in front of her. And when she provokes him saying “Why don’t you cry?”, his false response is: “Because I don’t want to”, (GE, 59) Pip is determined not to cry anymore for the beautiful and mean Estella, but his apparent insensibility is merely a self-defence

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hidden under a mask of shame. Undismayed, Pip continues to exhibit that mask even after leaving the house: but this time his imagination creates an account of the luxuries of Miss Havisham and Satis House; under the request of his sister and Pumblechook, he describes – or better, he invents – the rich setting of the immediately previous visit: according to Pip’s narration, Miss Havisham sat “in a black velvet coach” and Estella fed her with “cake and wine at the coach-window, on a gold plate”; moreover Pip adds the existence of “four immense dogs” fighting “for veal-cutlets out of a silver basket” , (GE, 61) What is incredible is that the adults believe him, and for the first time Pip has the attention he desires and his little moment of celebrity and fulfilment. As believed by Michael Slater, this fantasy :

seems to spell out the primary qualities of Dickens’s imagination, which isolated and emphasized the intrinsically odd, the astonishing and the bizarre, and delighted in the juxtaposition of incongruities and in wild departures from the expected.¹⁴³

To reinforce his statement, Slater quotes in his work on Dickens, a passage by George Santayana from the book *Soliloquies in England*, where the philosopher declares:

When people say Dickens exaggerates, it seems to me they can have no eyes and no ears. They probably have only *notions* of what things and people are: they accept them conventionally at their diplomatic value. Their minds run on in the region of discourse, where there are masks only, and no faces; ideas and no facts; they have little sense for those living grimaces that play from moment to moment on the countenance of the world.¹⁴⁴

This is exactly what Pip does. Even so, Pip sooner admits his lies to Joe, Pip tells him about:

a beautiful young lady at Miss Havisham’s who was dreadfully proud, and that she had said I was common, and that I knew I was common, and that I wished I was not common, and that the lies had come of it somehow, though I didn’t know how. (GE, 64)

The influence Estella has on Pip is so strong that even years later he becomes sure that his fortune derives from Miss Havisham’s idea of join the two young characters. Unfortunately the idol of money is the only one responsible for this misunderstood: Pip deludes himself in thinking that Miss Havisham is preparing him for Estella by giving him money and opportunities to change his social status.

¹⁴³ M. Slater, *Dickens 1970*, New York : Stein and Day , 1970. p. 19

¹⁴⁴ G. Santayana from M. Slater, *op.cit.*, 1970, p. 10

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When Pip finds out the true identity of his benefactor, he is profoundly ashamed; however he maintains the secret in order to help Magwitch to escape, he keeps him hidden and for the first time he uses his mask created by the money, not for his own benefit but for his patron's. On the one hand, Pip's energies to help Magwitch abscond, may be considered to be the beginning of his redemption, on the other hand it is surely an illegal action, hence the proof that Pip possesses one of Rousseau's vices of a corrupted man. Furthermore, Pip has been involved in several occasions of dishonest and immoral conduct that have been caused by money possession and snobbery; as a matter of fact he treats his best friend – Joe – with disdain because of his poor origins and manners, he accumulates enormous debts dragging down also his friend Herbert into profligacy and squander, and lastly, he refuses Magwitch when he becomes aware that his benefactor is not a gentleman himself nor a gentlewoman. However, Pip does ultimately regain his good-nature like the one he had when he was a child, but for a large part of the novel, he is a hardhearted man sensitive only towards money wealth and prestige.

When Joe visits Pip in London for the first time, the reader perceives that Pip's indifference and coolness is unpleasant to Joe; despite his clear discomfort, Pip seems to have lost all affections towards the blacksmith and does nothing to diminish Joe's uneasiness. However, especially in the last chapters, the reader can grasp that Pip can be benevolent and charitable again; but, from the moment he meets Estella until the encounter with Magwitch, he avoids the love and the simple human sympathy that he himself has striven for during all his life.

Barbara Hardy says that *Great Expectations* portrayed the "loss of innocence in a world where love requires the right manners, the right accent, the right clothes, and the right income". Pip's loss of innocence is due to his necessity to become rich and important, this results in a civilizing process. Yet this is not the end of the story, Pip is eventually redeemed, and becomes Dickens's interpretation of Rousseau's citizen. Pip, like David, owns a Dickensian memory, characterized by distinct and intense details, recalled in disseminate episodes throughout the novel, focused on the endurance of emotions throughout the years. One example can be: "To the present hour, the weary

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western streets of London on a cold dusty spring night, with their ranges of stern shut-up mansions and their long rows of lamps, are melancholy to me from this association". (DC, 419)

Talking about associations through memories, Pip relates his story as a remembrance, Barbara Hardy claims that he "is not shown as an unpleasant and obtuse snob, but always seen through the memory and sensibility of his unsnobbish older self"¹⁴⁵. The reader is able to understand Pip's change because he gives penetrating critical remarks of him, and realizes the faults of his juvenile and inexperienced behaviour. For example, after his meeting with Estella and during his unsatisfactory period with Joe at the forge, Pip comments:

It is not possible to know how far the influence of any amiable honest-hearted duty-doing man flies out into the world; but it is very possible to know how it has touched one's self in going by, and I know right well, that any good that intermixed itself with my apprenticeship came of plain contented Joe, and not of restless aspiring discontented me. (GE, 98)

This remark could only come from an adult Pip, thus the child's thoughts in that moment are of degrading labour as a blacksmith's apprentice. There are moments, however, when the young protagonist has introspective purposes and sensations that prefigure his final redemption. In one occurrence throughout his apprenticeship, he states:

And now, because my mind was not confused enough before, I complicated its confusion fifty thousand-fold, by having states and seasons when I was clear that Biddy was immeasurably better than Estella, and that the plain honest working life to which I was born, had nothing in it to be ashamed of, but offered me sufficient means of self respect and happiness. (GE, 120)

Similarly, when Joe makes his first visit in London, Pip observes his "simple dignity", and when he leaves Pip declares: "As soon as I could recover myself sufficiently, I hurried out after him and looked for him in the neighboring streets; but he was gone". (GE, 205-206) Pip is perfectly conscious of having betrayed his best friend, he admits: "I lived in a state of chronic uneasiness respecting my behaviour to Joe", just after he

¹⁴⁵ B. Hardy, *op.cit.*, p. 85

comprehends the foolishness of being a gentleman just because of Estella and Miss Havisham, and regrets the life in the small village:

I used to think, with a weariness on my spirits, that I should have been happier and better if I had never seen Miss Havisham's face, and had risen to manhood content to be partners with Joe in the honest old forge. Many a time of an evening, when I sat alone looking at the fire, I thought, after all, there was no fire like the forge fire and the kitchen fire at home. (GE, 248)

3.6.4 PIP'S REDEMPTION

Pip's conscious redemption begins when he discovers that his benefactor is Magwitch. Hardy remarks that the shock of this discovery "marks a moment of moral discovery. It leads to the conversion of Pip, to his forced intimacy with Magwitch, which, after all, becomes love"¹⁴⁶. While Pip helps Magwitch to leave the country and get out of England as soon as possible, he decides to refuse anything more from him; as he listens to Magwitch's version of the story, he is still threatened by the convict, but, at the same time, he feels compassionate towards him: "He regarded me with a look of affection that made him almost abhorrent to me again, though I had felt great pity for him". (GE, 322)

Together with the sympathy towards Magwitch, arrives Pip's forgiveness of Miss Havisham. She summons Pip at Satis House in order to beg his pardon, and Pip replies: "O Miss Havisham, I can do it now. There have been sore mistakes; and my life has been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much, to be bitter with you". (GE, 364) Not only he forgives her, but soon thereafter, Pip bears serious burns on his hands and arms to save Miss Havisham from the fire of her wedding dress. Pip's mercy towards his childhood agony and his self-sacrifice for her are additional indications of his redemptive progression.

David will also help Herbert Pocket by paying money for Herbert's position with Clarriker's. Pip confirms: "I had the great satisfaction of concluding that arrangement. It was the only good thing I had done, and the only completed thing I had done, since I

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.84

was first apprised of my great expectations". (GE, 380) Moreover, the affair has been stipulated without Herbert's cognizance, that moment Pip shows generosity as well as modesty.

According to Grahame Smith, the will of Pip to save Magwitch at the end of the novel, is the true end of Pip's enforced journey toward self-knowledge: "his recognition of the human worth of this complete outcast of society as the wheel turns full circle".¹⁴⁷ When, during the clandestine operation, Magwitch is gravely injured and captured, Pip confesses:

[...] When I took my place by Magwitch's side, I felt that that was my place henceforth while he lived. For now, my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted, wounded, shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (GE, 408)

Smith repeats: "His cleaving to Magwitch is the beginning of Pip's moral and spiritual regeneration".¹⁴⁸ Pip does not regard the destructive effects of this relationship on his social aspirations and he decides to assist Magwitch. Pip loses the opportunity to inherit Magwitch's properties, letting them to the Crown, but in spite of the perplexities showed by Jagers and Wemmick, Pip decides: "I had no claim, and I finally resolved, and ever afterwards abided by the resolution, that my heart should never be sickened with the hopeless task of attempting to establish one", (GE, 409) or better of trying to demonstrate his devotion to the money.

After Magwitch's death, Pip suffers from illness and feverish delirium. He has, once again, the opportunity to reflect upon his deeds and priorities. Joe is looking after him during the illness, which reminds Pip about his past happiness as a child:

I was like a child in his hands. He would sit and talk to me in the old confidence, and with the old simplicity, and in the old unassertive protecting way, so that I would half believe that all my life since the days of the old kitchen was one of the mental troubles of the fever that was gone. (GE, 426)

¹⁴⁷ G. Smith, *op.cit.*, 1968, pp.180-181

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.180

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These memories of childhood that come to Pip during Joe's visit are signals of his return to a more natural life, like the one he had in the country, at the forge. When Joe decides to leave, Pip is determined to take the last right actions:

What remained for me now, but to follow him to the dear old forge, and there to have out my disclosure to him, and my penitent remonstrance with him, and there to relieve my mind and heart of that reserved Secondly, which had begun as a vague something lingering in my thoughts, and had formed into a settled purpose? (GE, 431)

The second purpose is the marriage proposal to Biddy. Pip has the selfish certainty that she is still in love with him and interested in marrying him, a thought which shows traces of his past selfishness. Walking back to the forge he experiences "a sense of increasing relief" and "a sense of leaving arrogance and untruthfulness further and further behind" (GE, 435) Pip is, at first, surprised by the unexpected news of Biddy and Joe's wedding, but he feels simple pleasure and genuine happiness once he accepts it and receives their forgiveness, which is the last phase of his redemption, finally completed.

Pip begins to be a Dickensian and Rousseau's citizen when he decides to leave England and goes to Egypt in order to pay his debts and work for Herbert at Clarriker's. After some years, he becomes a partner with the firm: "I lived happily with Herbert and his wife, and lived frugally, and paid my debts, and maintained a constant correspondence with Biddy and Joe" (GE, 438) Pip is finally happy and satisfied with only basic necessities, he lives in harmony by helping others and showing compassion and sympathy without the strict schemes of money, high society and career. According to House:

The final wonder of *Great Expectations* is that in spite of all Pip's neglect of Joe and coldness towards Biddy and all the remorse and self-recrimination that they caused him, he is made to appear at the end of it all a really better person than he was at the beginning.¹⁴⁹

The juvenile expectations become less intense, however Pip does not find himself, at the end, poor or unhappy. He has a deep knowledge of life, real friends, and a

¹⁴⁹ H. House, *op.cit.*, p. 156

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respectable business; after all “it is a remarkable achievement to have kept the reader’s sympathy throughout a snob’s progress”.¹⁵⁰

Andrew Sanders recapitulates Pip’s redemption and the end of his story in this statement: “Whether or not Pip finds happiness with Estella matters less than his awareness of what matters most to him, his final expectations being based on surer foundations than were his earlier social and financial ones”.¹⁵¹

In conclusion, some critics agree with George Bernard Shaw, when he declares that “Dickens’s pet book [*David Copperfield*], was wiped out by *Great Expectations*”¹⁵², but many others prefer Humphrey House diplomatic account on *Great Expectations* as “the pendant to the first part of *David Copperfield*, the more mature revision of the progress of a young man in the world”.¹⁵³ Buckley succeeds in defining the similarities in the two characters of David and Pip, starting from the fact that – like many other apprentice-boys – they are orphans full of resentment and empty of independence; they both have “an excessive respect for the power of money”, and a strong belief that they “can somehow buy real security and peace of mind”. Speaking about the infatuations for Dora and Estella, they both love “against all reason a proud beauty who never can or will adequately reciprocate the affection”, and finally they anxiously “strive to conceal the past in the dread that public knowledge of the humble beginnings might debar [them] from the society of “gentlemen” toward which [they] too aggressively aspire”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁵¹ A. Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist*, Palgrave Macmillan, University of Michigan 1982, pp. 172-173

¹⁵² G. B., Shaw. *Shaw on Dickens*, ed. by D.H. Laurence and Martin Quinn, F. Ungar Publishing, New York, 1985, p.92

¹⁵³ H. House, *G.B.S. on Great Expectations*, The Dickensian, Vol. XLIV, 1948, p.64

¹⁵⁴ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, pp.45-46

CHAPTER 4

GIRLS

When we think about the female characters in Dickens's novels, we can perceive, once again, a significant inspiration from the author's personal experience.

Generally speaking, his 'little girls' have most of the times common and repeated traits: it can be noticed, in fact, that Dickens believed in innocent virtue and physical fragility as natural qualities in a youthful beauty, especially when the female nature is described in its primitive state. Despite the delicacy professed by the young Dickensian girls, Coveney's study assumes that "His women are, if they are young, too virtuous; his older women too often comic."¹⁵⁵ Remarking a sort of caricature in the characterization of the roles.

Patricia Ingham's study follows the concept of a young virtuous girl, and comes to define the figure of the 'nubile girl', obviously in contrast with the excessive female behaviour: "The *nubile girl*, so often presumed to be idealized, is a sign denied sexuality, physicality and individuality, and reductively treated in terms of surfaces and displaced physical appearance. [...] such perfection is assumed but never demonstrated".¹⁵⁶ A key point in the theme is the innocence and naivety worn by child-girls who are completely unaware of the outside world. That is the reason why they are often cheated, mistreated and isolated. However, some of them hide beyond their innocence, their good nature, that very nature sponsored by Rousseau, which cannot be corrupted.

Many examples will be considered in the course of the chapter: Nell Trent is the loving young protagonist of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, she is the centre of the pathos throughout the whole novel, which has its climax in her death. Kate Nickleby is *Nicholas Nickleby's* sister, with her natural incorruptible traits and loyalty to the family. Amy Dorrit – known simply as Little Dorrit – born in prison, becomes the perfect embodiment of an incorruptible creature. Amy, together with her family, will pass from a bad period within the Marshalsea's walls, to a richer environment, yet corrupted as the former, where the little girl cannot familiarize because of her pure nature. A longer section will be dedicated to the female characters of *David Copperfield*, starting from David's mother Clara and her childish

¹⁵⁵ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p.160

¹⁵⁶ P. Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1992, p.24

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attitude, followed by the two most relevant figures of the novel: Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield. Dora is David's first wife, a young infantile girl who reveals herself to be immature and puerile: Dora surely possesses an innate power to bewitch men, and this specific ability is reinforced by simple details, such as her clothes, David remembers: "a straw hat and blue ribbons, and a quantity of curls"; (DC, 385) anyway David will discover later to have been cheated by her beauty that hid her inadequacy. Agnes Wickfield is David's guardian angel, she demonstrates tenacity, fidelity and constancy towards his dad and towards her secret love. A brief section is dedicated to the other girl of the story: Little Em'ly. She falls into Steerforth's clutches because of her ingenuousness but, in the concluding stages of the book, she will redeem herself thanks to her uncle and David. Finally, the last girl mentioned will be Estella, the arrogant, spoiled protected of Miss Havisham. It seems that the only purpose of her presence in the book is to deceive Pip, but many times in the novel she seems to protect Pip from her seduction. She really does not want to break his heart, and at the end of the novel, the reader comprehends that she was a victim of Miss Havisham cruel vengeance too.

4.1 FEMALE INFLUENCES

Before entering in the female world of Dickens's novel, it is necessary to analyze the origins of such characters in the life of the author. The first girl I am going to mention is Fanny, Dickens's older sister, who became a boarding pupil at the Royal Academy of Music during the period Charles spent at Warren's blacking factory and their father was in prison. Dickens never forgot the resentment he felt towards his sister, and in particular towards his mother, Elizabeth Barrow. Despite the pain and the resentment Dickens felt for his mother, the strong relationship between Elizabeth and the first daughter is transposed in the conjunction between a young mother and her only child in Dickens's stories.

Elizabeth Dickens becomes therefore the inspiration for Clara Copperfield, portrayed as an heavenly being, idealized and extremely feminized; but what is relevant is the relationship between her and her son, David, – they seem to be at the same level because of the baby language, the caresses and tenderness; as a child, David is enchanted by his mother's beautiful look and sweetness. However, it can be noticed that the idealized mother is so much young that she needs a mother herself. Aunt Betsey repeatedly calls Clara Copperfield "child", moreover the nurse of the house is named Clara herself, this foreshadows the task of the governess to take care of both the young mother and the child:

'Peggotty!' repeated Miss Betsey, with some indignation. 'Do you mean to say, child, that any human being has gone into a Christian church, and got herself named Peggotty?' 'It's her surname,' said my mother, faintly. 'Mr. Copperfield called her by it, because her Christian name was the same as mine.' (DC, 7).

Good mothers of protagonists, are not destined to live very long; the surrogate mothers are in some traits masculinised and come on the scene at the premature death of the good mother, like David's mother and Miss Murdstone, or Pip's mother and Mrs. Joe. Newsome notices: "Not surprisingly, Dickens and his male protagonists tend to fall in love with women who reproduce features of the idealized young mother: almost childlike and babyish themselves, if angelic and doting".¹⁵⁷

Dickens's first love – Maria Beadnell – arrived when he was 18. She was the small and pretty daughter of a banker, however her parents did not approve Dickens's courtship and, in order to put an end to the relationship, sent her to school in Paris. Maria has long been considered the model for David Copperfield's Dora in the way she looks delicate and lovely,

¹⁵⁷ R. Newsom, *op.cit.*, p.43

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even though only David (and not Dickens) succeeded in marrying her and having a devoted wife. As Buckley reports: “Twenty-two years after the separation and over four years after the completion of *David Copperfield*, Dickens confessed to Maria, by that time matronly Mrs. Winter, that the novel contained “a faithful reflection of the passion” he had once for her”.¹⁵⁸ Yet, Michael Slater has another perspective. He argues, against the former conventional opinions, that it was Maria’s will not to continue the affair with Dickens, and not her parents’: “‘Desolate’ was what poor Dickens seems to have been during most of his three or four years of infatuation with Maria. Sometimes she gave him encouragement but mostly she made him suffer”.¹⁵⁹

This induced Slater to think that Maria was not actually the example for Dora, she was, on the contrary, the archetype for Estella in *Great Expectations*. He claims: “Biographers have long associated Estella in *Great Expectations* exclusively with the great love of Dickens’s last years, Ellen Ternan, and Pip’s unhappy passion for her with Dickens’s supposed miseries in loving Ellen. This is mere speculation, however, impure but simple”.¹⁶⁰ Ellen Ternan was a young actress of only 18 years old, Dickens, at the time of their first meeting in 1857 was already 45, but this did not impede him to deeply fall in love with her: a passion which brought him to divorce from his wife Catherine and endured until the end of his life. Slater declares: “It is not, I believe, to Ellen that we owe the powerful vision of frustrated love that Dickens gives us in the most perfectly achieved of all his novels but to Maria, making her last and most haunting appearance on the Dickens stage”.¹⁶¹

Patricia Ingham distinguishes among the numerous female heroines of Dickens’s repertory, by focusing her attention on *nubile girls*. These characters are identified as marriageable, thus the reader is expected to see them married within the end of the novel and their virginity and pureness are fundamental features. However the marriage is not always necessary – one example is Nell Trent – it is the expectation that matters. Ingham explains the theme of the *nubile girl*: “its signification relates to the insistence on nobility as well as to passivity shown by the women in the wooing and marrying process that they are expected to undergo. ‘Girls’ refers, of course, to their extreme youth”.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ J. Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.32

¹⁵⁹ M. Slater, *Dickens and Women*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983, pp.56-57

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.74

¹⁶² P. Ingham, *op.cit.*, p.18

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Most of the times, the *nubile girls* are characterized by delicacy and kindness, together with a lack of knowledge of their attractiveness. This is valid for Kate Nickleby, Dora Spenlow, Agnes Wickfield and Amy Dorrit. Their pre-pubertal look appears simple but sharp: Kate Nickleby is described as a girl of about seventeen years old “slight but very beautiful”. (NN, 23) Another essential feature is the littleness: here we can list Nell Trent, again with Amy Dorrit, Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield. Even though Nell Trent can be still considered as a child, Ingham classifies her as a *nubile girl*:

“It is not usual to include her amongst marriageable girls but this is because of a non-textual consideration of her that classifies her as a child. [...] She has the ‘slightest’ of figures and a very small and delicate frame, and she is irreproachably virgin, innocent and ignorant”.¹⁶³

Girls are usually described through a naturalistic terminology, which reduces them to something far from a human being, the flowers are often used as basis for comparison, because of its freshness, purity and fragility, otherwise, they are associated to an animal or a pet: Amy Dorrit becomes for her sister Fanny a “little dormouse” and a “little Tortoise” (LD, pp.584-586) and Dora Spenlow is indissolubly linked to Jip, her dog, as they were equal fellows, moreover she is, at a certain point, completely transfigured into an idealized Nature: “The sun shone Dora, and the birds sang Dora. The south wind blew Dora, and the wild flowers in the hedges were all Doras, to a bud”. (DC, 470)

Ingham later adds a further significance to her idea of *nubile girl*: “ This new level of meaning relates to an element vital in the vocabulary for the description of women during this period: that of hunger and food”.¹⁶⁴ Generally speaking the ability of a woman to provide and dispense food is a clue that the natural order of things is being preserved, but, in Dickens’s novels, the relationship between women and food is used, most of the times, to underline the fragility and attractiveness of pure young girls. The first example is in *David Copperfield*, when David dines for the first time in Spenlow’s house: “I don't remember who was there, except Dora. I have not the least idea what we had for dinner, besides Dora. My impression is, that I dined off Dora, entirely, and sent away half-a-dozen plates untouched”. (DC, 381) And of their marriage, he remembers:

a breakfast, with abundance of things, pretty and substantial, to eat and drink, whereof I partake, as I should do in any other dream, without the least perception of their flavour; eating and drinking, as I may say, nothing but love and marriage, and no more believing in the viands than in anything else. (DC, 616)

¹⁶³ Ibid., p.19

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p.29

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It is as if David would live of Dora forever, she is his psychological sustenance and drives him to transform her into an eternal food; however the comparison with viands, conveys the young girls as sexless entities – they become only an object, eatable by men's eyes. As Ingham specifies: "Nubile girls are in this way translated into the male sensations attaching to consumption of delicious food at the same time that direct physicality is overtly denied them".¹⁶⁵ The second example can be read in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; when Betsey, Quilp's wife, says that she accept the eventuality of a new wife for the cruel husband at her death, the sly dwarf immediately thinks about the young Nell and makes the proposal directly to her:

'There's no hurry, little Nell, no hurry at all,' said Quilp. 'How should you like to be my number two, Nelly?'

'To be what, sir?'

'My number two, Nelly, my second, my Mrs Quilp,' said the dwarf.

The child looked frightened, but seemed not to understand him, which Mr Quilp observing, hastened to make his meaning more distinctly.

'To be Mrs Quilp the second, when Mrs Quilp the first is dead, sweet Nell,' said Quilp, wrinkling up his eyes and luring her towards him with his bent forefinger, 'to be my wife, my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife. Say that Mrs Quilp lives five year, or only four, you'll be just the proper age for me. (OCS, 47)

Quilp confesses his interest in the girl, he is attracted by her full bloom, as if he could one day be the owner of a beautiful flower: "Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,' said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; 'such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!'. (OCS, 76)

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p.33

4.2 THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP: NELL TRENT

Nell Trent is the girl of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. She is an orphan girl of fourteen years old, who lives with her grandfather in his shop of antiquary. This angelic creature is sadly destined to pay with death his grandfather's gambling addiction. There is one specific episode I should mention here, and it is the one that sees Nell wandering repeatedly into a churchyard, where often she finds some other children:

Some young children sported among the tombs, and hid from each other, with laughing faces. They had an infant with them, and had laid it down asleep upon a child's grave, in a little bed of leaves. It was a new grave--the resting-place, perhaps, of some little creature, who, meek and patient in its illness, had often sat and watched them, and now seemed, to their minds, scarcely changed. She drew near and asked one of them whose grave it was. The child answered that that was not its name; it was a garden--his brother's. It was greener, he said, than all the other gardens, and the birds loved it better because he had been used to feed them. When he had done speaking, he looked at her with a smile, and kneeling down and nestling for a moment with his cheek against the turf, bounded merrily away. (OCS, 407)

The long passage gives an account of how children can express an adult thought in their own words and view: it is surely something purer than a mature consideration. According to John Carey:

“(the children) still believe the things which adults would find it comforting to believe, if only they could bring themselves to be fatuous enough. Such plastic children bring tears to the grown-up eye, because they represent an innocence which the grown-up wrongly imagines he once possessed himself”.¹⁶⁶

As already written, Carey distinguishes Dickensian children in dwarves – who can have a child's body but an adult mind – and natural children, innocent and genuine, with a complete childish characterization. Nell is in this sense a dwarf. She is concerned about his grandfather's life and health, and this attention sets her into the adult world more than that of the children. As Carey says: “She is a dwarf who brings not only intimations of immortality but a superannuation scheme as well”.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ J. Carey, *op.cit.*, p.136

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*,p.140

4.3 NICHOLAS NICKLEBY: KATE NICKLEBY

If we consider Rousseau's ideas about the natural man, it is possible to notice some of his traits in Kate Nickleby – Nicholas's younger sister, with whom she shares courage and determination.

In other Dickensian novels, few women show "natural traits", and the majority of them represent the conventional image of the "angel of the house", characterized by mercy and composure. However, few women in Dickens's novels have the possibility to show outside the realm of the house their real and instinctive nature – Kate is one of these. Identified more than once as "the timid country girl, (NN, 92) Kate is obliged to leave her country life at the moment of her father's death, when she and her mother moved to a slum in the city of London. The difference is clear and striking: Dickens firstly decides to create a striking opposition between the delicacy or the purity of a girl and the awful, dirty and gloomy settings around her; after her father's death she is obliged to move to "a large old dingy house in Thames Street: the door and windows of which were so bespattered with mud, that it would have appeared to have been uninhabited for years", moreover "There was a wharf behind, opening on the Thames. An empty dog-kennel, some bones of animals, fragments of iron hoops, and staves of old casks, lay strewn about, but no life was stirring there. It was a picture of cold, silent decay".(NN, 99) The clashing contrast between the girl and the decadent structure contributes to create the discordant effect and bringing us back to that famous Warren's warehouse, so hated by the author. Even Florence Dombey, in *Dombey and Son*, presents a similar disparity of a pure child in a decaying atmosphere: "Florence lived alone in the great dreary house [...] No magic dwelling-place in magic story, shut up in the heart of a thick wood, was ever more solitary and deserted to the fancy, than was her father's mansion in its grim reality". (DS, 318)

Returning to Kate, she has been deprived of her familiar nest, where she could find protection and happiness together with a natural primary setting: now, in London – once again the cradle of corruption and cruelty – she is forced to live in a society where, without her beloved brother, she confronts harsh humiliation and affronts like those of Mr. Mantalini, the indifference of Mrs. Witterly and the cruel uncle Ralph. Kate will find tranquillity and serenity only with Nicholas return to the family: "Her former cheerfulness was restored, her step regained its elasticity and lightness, the colour which had forsaken

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her cheek visited it once again, and Kate Nickleby looked more beautiful than ever". (NN, 366) Kate is a young girl who prefers solitude to an impolite society, she strives for a peaceful and domestic serenity with her family; the change of her behaviour and health due to Nicholas comeback, clearly shows a satisfaction and joy in Kate's perspective: she only wishes to remain with her loved ones. However, Kate's father's death brings her to seek even the most basic necessity of a girl: "I will try to do anything that will gain me a home and bread". (NN, 19) She is so concerned about maintaining the nuclear family united, that she is determined to preserve the only family relationship she has: the one with her mother.

Mrs. Nickleby is an ambitious and possessive woman, who does not hesitate to castigate Kate for the loss of the family's precious belongings, because the daughter talks about them in "that cold and unfeeling way", (NN, 424) but Kate answers:

You and Nicholas are left to me, we are together once again, and what regard can I have for a few trifling things of which we never feel the want? When I have seen all the misery and desolation that death can bring, and known the lonesome feeling of being solitary and alone in crowds, and all the agony of separation in grief and poverty when we most needed comfort and support from each other, can you wonder that I look upon this as a place of such delicious quiet and rest, that with you beside me I have nothing to wish for or regret? (NN, 425)

Dickens does not let the reader to know if Kate's character would have been different once, but here, the girl's utterance indicates that her knowledge of life's aspects results from several harsh experiences; in addition, the fact that she is satisfied with humble and basic elements, in spite of her mother's manias, means that this is an innate natural quality to her. The reader is not surprised to see that Kate's loving approach to her family is moved also towards vulnerable people around her, Nicholas has no doubt about her compassion and treatment towards Smike, and she repays his expectations:

Kate advanced towards him [Smike] so kindly, and said in such a sweet voice, how anxious she had been to see him after all her brother had told her, and how much she had to thank him for having comforted Nicholas so greatly in their very trying reverses, that he began to be very doubtful whether he should shed tears or not, and became still more flurried [...] Kate, although she was so kind and considerate, seemed to be so wholly unconscious of his distress and embarrassment, that he recovered almost immediately and felt quite at home. (NN, 335)

While Mrs. Nickleby persists to live in a happy ignorance, and Nicholas becomes acquainted with Dotheboys Hall and its world, Kate is always described as an innocent creature. She is like a fish out of water, especially compared to his rude uncle Ralph:

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It was a curious contrast to see how the timid country girl shrunk through the crowd that hurried up and down the streets, giving way to the press of people, and clinging closely to Ralph as though she feared to lose him in the throng. (NN, 92)

But even more striking is the disparity between their thoughts and feelings:

It would have been a stranger contrast still, to have read the hearts that were beating side by side; to have laid bare the gentle innocence of the one, and the rugged villainy of the other; to have hung upon the guileless thoughts of the affectionate girl, and been amazed that, among all the wily plots and calculations of the old man, there should not be one word or figure denoting thought of death or of the grave. (NN, 92)

Their souls seem to be created to be one the opposite of the other:

The warm young heart palpitated with a thousand anxieties and apprehensions, while that of the old worldly man lay rusting in its cell, beating only as a piece of cunning mechanism, and yielding no one throb of hope, or fear, or love, or care, for any living thing. (NN, 92)

Kate is a black sheep in a false society, where every human being wears a mask in order to hide his real self and his emotions, her authenticity and candour clash with the busy and unnatural urban lifestyle. She owes an inborn consciousness of her personal integrity, and throughout the novel she does not allow anyone to violate it. She demonstrates to be capable to live with her own standards and she does compromise her virtue by wearing a mask in order to please others or achieve her purpose.



Figura 4.1. Illustration by H.K. Browne (also known as "Phiz"). *Kate Nickleby Sitting to Miss La Creevy*. 1838. From j. A. Hammerton, the dickens picture-book. From <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/nickleby/6.html>>.

4.4 LITTLE DORRIT: AMY DORRIT

Amy Dorrit is the girl protagonist of a satirical work which denounces the shortcoming of the government and bureaucracy in the society of the period. The novel was published between 1855 and 1857; and there is no wonder to apprehend that this time Dickens decided to debate also the miserable conditions in the debtor's prison of the Marshalsea. During the Dorrits journey to Italy, Amy happens to find herself in decadent conditions: "In a mouldering reception-room, where the faded hangings, of a sad sea-green, had worn and withered until they looked as if they might have claimed kindred with the waifs of seaweed drifting under the windows". (LD, 472) John Carey deduces that "Into these waterside ruins with their traces of vanished grandeur, he [Dickens] places small pure females to represent, in some sense, the small, pure child he saw himself as in the mouldering, panelled house by the Thames".¹⁶⁸ Dickens shamelessly puts a young innocent and fragile girl inside a story of debts, poverty, richness and falsity, in addition, he gives birth to Amy directly inside the prison, which is described as:

"An oblong pile of barrack building, partitioned into squalid houses standing back to back, so that there were no back rooms; environed by a narrow paved yard, hemmed in by high walls duly spiked at top".(LD, 54) Thus giving her the name of the Child of Marshalsea; Hobsbaum confirms: "For the prison proves to be a microcosm of the society outside, with all its euphemism and hypocrisy".¹⁶⁹

Amy Dorrit has got "a pale transparent face, quick in expression, though not beautiful in feature, its soft hazel eyes excepted. A delicately bent head, a tiny form, a quick little pair of busy hands, and a shabby dress", (LD, 51) unfortunately her expectations are not so promising :

With no earthly friend to help her [...], with no knowledge even of the common daily tone and habits of the common members of the free community who are not shut up in prisons; born and bred in a social condition, false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own unwholesome and unnatural taste; the Child of the Marshalsea began her womanly life. (LD, 67)

¹⁶⁸ J. Carey, *op.cit.*, p.152

¹⁶⁹ P. Hobsbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1998, p.194

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Actually, together with the theme of the prison, which pervades the entire novel, the family provides another prominent argument. It can be immediately noticed that the Dorrits are not part of a loving, happy family like that of Dickens's earlier works. Here, the parents are selfish and unfit, cruel and mean.

Once again the distorted values and the corruption of the Victorian society are mirrored on a smaller reality, in particular in the dynamics of a family. What is really fundamental for Mr. Dorrit and Amy's siblings is the material wealth and ownership, so that many times, the parent/child relationship is reversed: the children are predestined to bear the responsibilities and the errors of their begetters. It is curious that in such distorted families, the disguise of a real precarious circumstance becomes crucial: there is always a mask of normality and serenity at all cost, even if the family is actually forced in a prison and full of debts. The prisoners called themselves "collegians", as if they were living in a sort of community rather than in a jail, and once the Dorrits leave for Europe, they do the best they can to conceal their previous existence in the prison. The society's corruption reveals itself metaphorically in the mentions of many diseases and illness throughout the story, starting from the fetid stinking air of the prison, to the filthy streets of London, which look back to the unhealthy living conditions of the nineteenth-century citizen who suffered from physical and mental infirmities.

Little Dorrit has not experienced the light heartedness of childhood, because she was involved in taking care of her unrewarding family; even when she becomes rich, she finds herself confused and isolated once again, incapable to adapt herself to that new reality, which, everything considered, it is not so new. As a matter of fact, the advanced social conditions of the Dorrits family, in the second part of the novel, are anything but another episode of mock dignity and hypocrisy, perfectly the same of that in the Marshalsea; Little Dorrit is, of course, the only one who comprehends the falsity and lets the reader know it:

It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. (LD, 487)

Even their habits are compared with the practices of the jail:

They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go: in all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor accommodation, and

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disparaged a place while they pretended to like it: which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. They were envied when they went away by people left behind, feigning not to want to go: and that again was the Marshalsea habit invariably. (LD, 487)

According to Hobsbaum: “just as Dickens demonstrates the failure of Circumlocution Office to govern the country, so he [through Little Dorrit’s eyes] reveals with emotion ranging from cool irony to burning indignation the failure of Society to set its prisoners free”.¹⁷⁰ Amy Dorrit herself adds:

They had precisely the same incapacity for settling down to anything, as the prisoners used to have; they rather deteriorated one another, as the prisoners used to do; and they wore untidy dresses, and fell into a slouching way of life: still, always like the people in the Marshalsea. (LD, 487)

In a certain sense, Amy’s characterization is something extreme: the reader is always brought to compare her to the others – she is more delicate, more honest, more incorruptible, and more discerning. Dickens himself identifies Amy as a ‘moral independent girl’, very different from those who share her social category: “she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest”. (LD, 67)

¹⁷⁰ P. Hobsbaum, *op.cit.*, p.201



Figura 3.2. Illustration by H.K. Browne (also known as "Phiz"). *Miss Dorrit and Little Dorrit*. From Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, 1855.
From < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/153.html>>

4.5 DAVID COPPERFIELD

4.5.1 CLARA COPPERFIELD AND CLARA PEGOTTY

Clara Copperfield, David's mother, is presented as a lonely little girl, pregnant of a fatherless baby, who sits disconsolate "poorly in health, and very low in spirits" by the fire; she is "very timid and sad, and very doubtful of ever coming alive out of the trial that was before her." (DC, 3) Dickens decides to give her childish manners, in contrast with the strong and decisive Pegotty, with whom she shares only the first name and the affection towards David.

When Clara falls in love with the cruel Mr. Murdstone, she is blocked by her fragility and abandons her son to the brutal education of Mr. and Miss. Murdstone. Pegotty is the only one who takes care of the young David and with determination she protects him from his stepfather, moreover she will look after him during the whole story. The two women share different parts of the motherhood role to David.



Changes at Home

Figura 3.3. Illustration by H.K. Browne (also known as "Phiz"). *Changes at Home*. From Dickens's *David Copperfield*. July 1849.

From < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dc/8.html>>.

4.5.2 DORA SPENLOW

The first meeting between David and Dora happens during a visit of the young boy to his chief's house. It is a love at first sight for David who narrates:

I heard a voice say, 'Mr. Copperfield, my daughter Dora, and my daughter Dora's confidential friend!' It was, no doubt, Mr. Spenlow's voice, but I didn't know it, and I didn't care whose it was. All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny. I was a captive and a slave. I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction! (DC, 379)

Dora is presented as a supernatural creature through David's eyes, she is like a pagan angel, in opposition to Agnes Wickfield:

She was more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don't know what she was - anything that no one ever saw, and everything that everybody ever wanted. I was swallowed up in an abyss of love in an instant. There was no pausing on the brink; no looking down, or looking back; I was gone, headlong, before I had sense to say a word to her. (DC, 379)

David is completely hypnotized by her delicacy, beauty and innocence, all childish attributes that obscures her naivety, incapacity and inexperience due to a sheltered life. He succeed in marrying her, but he soon discovers that she is not the perfect wife and their marriage become unnatural. According to many the scholars, there are instances of the Freudian concepts, according to which David wanted to marry an exact duplicate of his beloved young mother, in order to fill an emptiness in his heart. But when Dora cannot satisfy David's expectations, their relationship makes an allusion to the one that existed between Mr. Murdstone and Clara Copperfield, in the way that the husband tried to transform his wife into something more suitable to his habits. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that David's approach towards Dora is the same of his step-father: the young protagonist is patient and understanding; he repeatedly avoids to sadden his child-wife by overlooking her inadequacy as landlady. Of course, David is at first unhappy to discover little and pure Dora's ineptitude in managing the household, but then he learns to accept her defects and their life seems to be quite merry for a period. While David experiences a whole new world outside, Dora, on the contrary does not develop into a mature woman; she stays inside the house waiting for her husband, unaware of her superficiality and fragility. Her childish inconstancy leads her to move quickly from tears to laughter, but she is not able to grow up together with her beloved. David is incapable to find reassurance and support from his wife, because, in order to protect her, he avoids to unload his anxieties and worries:

Thus it was that I took upon myself the toils and cares of our life, and had no partner in them. We lived much as before, in reference to our scrambling household arrangements; but I had

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got used to those, and Dora I was pleased to see was seldom vexed now. She was bright and cheerful in the old childish way, loved me dearly, and was happy with her old trifles. (DC, 629-630)

Ingham points out the crux:

As Dora herself recognises, her failure as a wife is the result of her essential irrationality and irresponsibility, which cannot be changed. Copperfield himself only sees that he cannot change her, not that her childish qualities were the cause of his infatuation in the first place.¹⁷¹

Even when Dora and David get married, they make a childish pair: David tries many time to drive Dora about the organization of the house keeping, but the reader perfectly understand that she is not yet prepared to wear the dress of a meticulous wife:

'Will you call me a name I want you to call me?' inquired Dora, without moving. 'What is it?' I asked with a smile. 'It's a stupid name,' she said, shaking her curls for a moment. 'Child-wife.' [...]

'I don't mean, you silly fellow, that you should use the name instead of Dora. I only mean that you should think of me that way. When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, "it's only my child-wife!" When I am very disappointing, say, "I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!" When you miss what I should like to be, and I think can never be, say, "still my foolish child-wife loves me!" For indeed I do.' (DC, 627).

Only when David matures, he finally understands that Dora has been "The first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" (DC, 647). As adult, he cannot deny his disappointment in discovering that matrimonial expectations are far from what he had hoped:

What I missed, I still regarded - I always regarded - as something that had been a dream of my youthful fancy; that was incapable of realization; that I was now discovering to be so, with some natural pain, as all men did. But that it would have been better for me if my wife could have helped me more, and shared the many thoughts in which I had no partner; and that this might have been; I knew. (DC, 678)

The breakdown of David and Dora's marriage, opposed to the success of David and Agnes's, supports Dickens's conviction that faithfulness and perseverance are among the most important moral attributes for a young man and woman.

¹⁷¹ P. Ingham, *op.cit.*, p.66



I fall into captivity.

Figura 3.4. Illustration by H.K. Browne (also known as "Phiz"). *I fall into captivity.* From Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Jan 1850.

From: < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dc/20.html> >

4.5.3 AGNES WICKFIELD

Contrary to Dora's description – full of precipitancy and innocence that can leave anyone defenceless and characterless – Agnes one's is a symbol of calm, charity and kindness, all qualities that David needs to discipline his heart and come to maturity: "Although her face was quite bright and happy, there was a tranquillity about it, and about her - a quiet, good, calm spirit - that I never have forgotten; that I shall never forget".(DC, 217) David meets Agnes for the first time at the age of 12, during the first visit to Mr. Wickfield. They will grow up together like brother and sister, but Agnes is secretly in love with him.

Agnes is for David like his "good Angel", compared to his "bad Angel" Steerforth; (DC, 357) she will never reveals her feelings until the very end of the novel and David will not know about them during the whole story. However, Agnes becomes one of the pillar of strength for David during his bad periods, and his confidant. Following a typical boyish behaviour, David begins to consider Agnes from a different point of view, just because of his jealousy towards the soapy Uriah Heep. Only after Dora's death, David and the reader are finally allowed to know Agnes's feelings:

'I am so blest, Trotwood - my heart is so overcharged - but there is one thing I must say.'

'Dearest, what?'

She laid her gentle hands upon my shoulders, and looked calmly in my face.

'Do you know, yet, what it is?'

'I am afraid to speculate on what it is. Tell me, my dear.'

'I have loved you all my life!' (DC, 842)

Agnes devotion to David, repays her with a joyful marriage and a devoted and loving husband; David realises: "Clasped in my embrace, I held the source of every worthy aspiration I had ever had; the centre of myself, the circle of my life, my own, my wife; my love of whom was founded on a rock!".(DC, 844) According to Dickens's justice, the happiest characters in the novel are those who have demonstrated constancy of heart and tenacity, among numerous examples, Agnes stands out for her resolute affection, her calm and patient love against Uriah's attempt to seduce her and impoverish her father.

As already said, David Copperfield is one of the closest book associated to the author's life. While writing the novel, Dickens had a daughter named Dora Annie Dickens; it is quite interesting that the father chose the name of David's child-wife, instead of Agnes, but the destiny played an even more bizarre trick: Dora died suddenly few months later than her birth. This accidental bond between Dickens's private life and his work, is reported in the

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work of Monod: “The novelist, whose keen sensitiveness to coincidence is well known, must have been painfully struck by that blow of fate and must have regretted giving to his child the name of the “Little Blossom” in the novel”.¹⁷²

Dora’s death is one of the highest point of David Copperfield’s story if not the most moving. Dickens’s skill lies in his ability of managing the stylistic and dramatic effects. As a matter of fact, David is not present when Dora dies, and he could not hear her last words. He just waits downstairs, with Jip which is also aged and dying. Dora’s death is not announced by human words, David is left alone with his thoughts: “As I look out on the night, my tears fall fast, and my undisciplined heart is chastened heavily – heavily”. Then he finally sees Agnes coming downstairs, but the bad news is just written in her face:

That face, so full of pity, and of grief, that rain of tears, that awful mute appeal to me, that solemn hand upraised towards Heaven! “Agnes?” It is over. Darkness comes before my eyes; and, for a time, all things are blotted out of my remembrance. (DC, 749)

It is Agnes who brings the tragic news to David, and it is again Agnes who will take the role Dora had once. In Monod’s opinion: “The fact that so few words should be spoken in the course of that closing scene, that there should not even be a closing scene, properly speaking, is a sure sign of Dickens’s progress toward sober simplicity”.¹⁷³

¹⁷²S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p.366

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.353



Figura 3.5 Illustration by H.K. Browne (also known as "Phiz"). *Mr. Wickfield and his partner wait upon my Aunt.* From Dickens's *David Copperfield*. April 1850.
From: < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dc/25.html> >

4.5.4 LITTLE EMILY

Steerforth's seduction and corruption of the young Emily is supported by the young boy's opinion about the low classes, he once underlines David the gap between him and 'that sort of people':

They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say - some people contend for that, at least; and I am sure I don't want to contradict them - but they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded. (DC, 286)

Little Emily has been bewitched by the young charming Steerforth, this caused her many troubles, and some enemies, one among others is Rosa Dartle, whose jealousy is accurately depicted by the author:

I would have her whipped! [...] I would have her branded on the face, dressed in rags, and cast out in the streets to starve. If I had the power to sit in judgement on her, I would see it done. See it done? I would do it! I detest her. If I ever could reproach her with her infamous condition, I would go anywhere to do so. If I could hunt her to her grave, I would. (DC, 459)

But Rosa's secret obsession for Steerforth is gradually brought to light by Steerforth himself, who replies to David's questions:

'And I have no doubt she loves you like a brother?' [David asks innocently]
'Humph!' retorted Steerforth, looking at the fire. 'Some brothers are not loved over much; and some love - but help yourself, Copperfield! We'll drink the daisies of the field, in compliment to you.' (DC, 287)

According to Monod, "the unfinished sentence is of course supposed to mean something like "some love is not brotherly", or " some time in an unbrotherly manner." And adds, "Steerforth is aware that when discussing the feelings that subsist between Rosa Dartle and himself he is on dangerous ground. So he prefers to cut the conversation short with a joke".¹⁷⁴

Little Emily has an unconscious common thread with another female character who, at the end is redeemed just like Emily: Martha Endell. They both achieve their salvage by leaving their past existence in England and travelling to a foreign land, leaving beyond the judgement of the society – culprit of their disgraces.

¹⁷⁴ S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 357

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We know that Emily, already from her infancy, has the desire to be a gentlewoman and own money. David once asked her: "You would like to be a lady?"", and she replies firmly laughing and nodding: "Yes!", she continues:

I should like it very much. We would all be gentlefolks together, then. Me, and uncle, and Ham, and Mrs. Gummidge. We wouldn't mind then, when there comes stormy weather. - Not for our own sakes, I mean. We would for the poor fishermen's, to be sure, and we'd help 'em with money when they come to any hurt. (DC, 33-34)

Although her purposes are only towards the wealth of her family and the fishermen community, the attention towards such richness prefigures her choice of the wealthy Steerforth, instead of the poor Ham. Martha, on the contrary, does not reveal aspiration towards money or a good position in society; actually we do not know much of her past and why she has been seduced. Anyway, she has been debased and destined to live as a prostitute in London. Martha redeems herself in the novel through the help she offers to David and Dan Pegotty in order to find little Emily. She rejects money for that:

I could not do what I have promised, for money,' she replied. 'I could not take it, if I was starving. To give me money would be to take away your trust, to take away the object that you have given me, to take away the only certain thing that saves me from the river. (DC, 667)

Her good deed is a way to be absolved from her sins in the eyes of David and Dan Pegotty, and in her own. Both the girls will find a complete forgiveness through Dan Pegotty, who takes them with him to Australia, far away from the corrupted society of London where they could begin a new life together and become citizens. Emily starts immediately her path to recovery during the voyage, she helps poor and sick people on the ship:

But there was some poor folks aboard as had illness among 'em, and she took care of them; and there was the children in our company, and she took care of them; and so she got to be busy, and to be doing good, and that helped her. (DC, 846)

Martha finds peace and stability in marrying a farm-laborer with whom she begins a new life. They "set up fur their two selves in the Bush. She [Martha] spoke to me fur to tell him her trew story. I did. They was married, and they live fower hundred mile away from any voices but their own and the singing birds". (DC, 848) Martha concretely returns to nature and solitude, the only social bound in her life as citizen is her marriage.



Figura 3.6. Illustration by Sol Eytinge, Jr. "Little Em'ly," the frontispiece for the volume. From The first full-page illustration for the Diamond Edition of Dickens's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867)

From: < <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/eytinge/54.html> >

4.6 GREAT EXPECTATION: ESTELLA

Estella is a particular variation in the scene of Dickens's girls, because her life at the decadent Satis House does not seem terrible or poor, but as a reflection she makes Pip feel a miserable common labouring boy, and here we have the image of the humiliated boy. According to Monod, Estella is quite a peculiar character, in the sense that she looks many times unnatural and cruel, this is quite strange especially for a young girl of her age, moreover her speeches are in truth questionable and unlikely:

'It seems,' said Estella, very calmly, 'that there are sentiments, fancies - I don't know how to call them - which I am not able to comprehend. When you say you love me, I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there. I don't care for what you say at all. I have tried to warn you of this; now, have I not?' (GE, 331)

Estella is the opposite character of Biddy, who – Monod adds – “ Belongs to the same category as Agnes Wickfield (see *David Copperfield*), although Biddy is less radiant. What she has in common with Agnes is her improbable and irksome perfection, her tendency to teach and preach morality”.¹⁷⁵ It must be said, however, that during the development of the novel the reader comes to know that young Estella was brought up by Miss Havisham with the sole purpose of hating men and making them suffer; no surprise if the girl has a stone heart.

Even Estella, at the end of the novel, will find a sort of redemption through the eyes of the reader: she has suffered oppressions and physical torment from her husband, Bentley Drummle “who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness”. (GE, 440) Moreover she is, in the end of the novel, aware of her inside change as a woman:

'But you said to me,' returned Estella, very earnestly, 'God bless you, God forgive you!' And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now - now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends.' (GE, 442)

The decadent description of the abandoned Satis House that is by now in ruins, contributes to underline the abandonment and the separation of the girl from the civilized social life linked to Miss Havisham. The noblewoman is responsible for Estella's perversions towards men, but she asks ultimately Pip's forgiveness before her dramatic death, even though the young protagonist perfectly knows the gravity of her deeds: “That she had done a grievous

¹⁷⁵ S. Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 482

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thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride, found vengeance in, I knew full well". (GE, 364)

Despite all the underhand ploys she did in life, Miss Havisham has a repentance at the point of death for having transformed an innocent girl into an insensitive woman; she admits:

But as she grew, and promised to be very beautiful, I gradually did worse, and with my praises, and with my jewels, and with my teachings, and with this figure of myself always before her a warning to back and point my lessons, I stole her heart away and put ice in its place. (GE, 365)

In conclusion, despite Miss Havisham mission to teach Estella to be hard-hearted and unloving, she is, only at the very end, able to recognize her wrongs and be forgiven by Pip.



Figura 3.7. Photographic reproduction of pen and ink drawing by H. M. Brock. "Well? You can break his heart". Illustration for Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Gresham Publishing Company, 1901-1903. From the Charles Dickens Museum, London. From: <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/brock/2.html>>

CONCLUSIONS

The study has shown how the development of a boy or a girl is deeply influenced by the environment and the people around them. Dickens often creates a twine of events that seems quite impossible, but it is done in order to challenge the young hero, who has to face the danger of a civilized society, the importance of a social status and the judgement of the adults. As Coveney noticed: "Sentimentality does indeed serve to describe the feeling one frequently has with Dickens's children, that he has directed towards the child exaggerated emotions of pathos, deriving from his self-pitying attitude to his own experience as a child".¹⁷⁶

Dickens characters surely are able to enter inside the reader's heart and to make him empathize with the young protagonists, so that the happy future of the girl or boy became a priority. Despite the fact that the young David's aim is to govern his 'undisciplined heart', he appears to the reader with sympathy from the beginning, he looks basically kind and agreeable; there is an effortless innate nobility in his nature. On the contrary, Pip is more complex: he is corrupted by selfish pride, delusion of himself, guilt, hypocrisy and snobbery, but despite all these negative aspects, he is able to redeem himself, thus to regain the reader's approbation.

In my opinion, a different perspective should be applied to the girls: they, in fact, seem to be too much superficial or too much devoted, they do not have a measure of a real girl: of course they are characterized by a childish and frivolous attitude, without heavy responsibility, but together with that infantile sphere, a girl has to prove herself to become wiser and wiser, a process that does not seem to be so continuous in Dickensian females: if the boy develops a maturity throughout the story, the girl seems to reach the adulthood only at the very end, when she discovers her redemption and the changes in her life. Thus – to quote some examples – Dora remains a little child until her death, when she passes her wife's role to Agnes, Agnes herself does not reveal her true feelings to David until the very end, and Estella ultimately 'learn a lesson' just at the conclusion of the story when she remains alone.

Generally speaking girls are portrayed as perfect and impeccable creatures from the beginning, they appear at first quite boring in their manners and behaviour, but then they demonstrate – even though in a softer and dignified way – to have emotions and sensations

¹⁷⁶ P. Coveney, *op.cit.*, p.158

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just like real girls, this is maybe the reason why at the end, even the girls are able to enter in the reader's heart.

It is true however, that even though the reader may see a growing pessimism in the opposition between country and city, due to the civilization's invasion, the dichotomy shows also an optimistic feedback. Perhaps it will be hard, if not impossible to change the whole society and restore the natural paradise that once existed, and probably Dickens knew that the countryside would have been soon contaminated by the dishonesty and viciousness of the city. Dickens surely understood that the human nature could not return to the past simplicity and the genuinely basic life, mainly because the man could not refuse the knowledge he has acquired, this would mean refuse himself and the progress. Like Rousseau, Dickens in a sense accepts the civilized world, and decided to settle his hopes and expectations for humankind in the hands of the individual – of the child. The child can learn to live in a society, he or she can become a citizen and encourage compassion and collaboration.

Coveney states: "The child in Dickens lives at the point of impact between the world of innocent awareness and the world of man's insensitivity to man".¹⁷⁷ The little characters find themselves in such a delicate position that it would be ambitious to find a general fixed definition of the role. Everything considered, Dickens's approach to childhood clearly express the necessity to find, during the growth, a balance between the two counterparts, an equilibrium between full heart and indifference, between sentimentalism and the apathy of the society. Coveney adds: "The child became for [Dickens] the symbol of sensitive feeling anywhere in a society maddened with the pursuit of material progress"¹⁷⁸ If the child succeed in finding this compromise, he or she will live a serene life with himself and with the others.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.112

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 74

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