

## THE SUBVERSIVE HUMOR OF *DAVID COPPERFIELD*

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*David Copperfield* is a masterpiece of deception. By this, I do not mean that it is a fictional treatise on deceit or that a majority of its characters deliberately function as deceivers. Rather, the deception lies in the craft of the author, as to how he presents his characters and situations, independent of whether they are good or bad. Thus, the deception does not work in the characters but on the reader, who may end up feeling "tricked" but more often simply confused about how to react. I doubt that Dickens made this a practiced goal. By his own admission, he was able to see more and hear more than most people, and thus, he was driven to portray the droll idiosyncrasies of his characters—for he caught them so vividly at all times and in all places. But as a novelist, he had also to show the serious complexities of life that those characters could get themselves into or merely fall prey to as human beings. The result is tragedy developed through humor and comedy shot through with darkness. This is not always easy for the reader to handle:

With Dickens, the comic situation is established and then subtly deranged; the reader is drawn into the author's presence to laugh heartily with him, not noticing that he is being pushed gently toward the exit, and then suddenly he finds himself out in the street facing a locked door. More often, however, the reader is presented with a door so contrived as to seem both open and shut at the same time. He is given an ambiguous invitation, expressing either hospitality or contempt, and he likely stands outside unable to

decide what to do.<sup>1</sup>

Herein lies the subversive humor of *David Copperfield*.

As the above quotation suggests, there are "locked doors" in the book. One that immediately comes to mind is Barkis of "Barkis is willin'" fame. Every time we meet the old carrier, we laugh at his pokey, mysterious ways and painfully laconic speech: we laugh at his winks and chuckles, his knowing "Ah! Her!", his three-word marriage proposal, his utter lack of knowledge about Peggoty. Once he is married, we assume he has reached the ultimate in comfort. However, he is next shown after many years laid up in bed, a little more talkative, but going through "unheard-of agonies," "dismal suppressed groans," and martyr-like suffering to assure himself that his "old clothes box" is still under the bed.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Barkis is a "little nearer" than he used to be, and we laugh at what he thinks is a grandly-kept secret. But Barkis at the same time is dying, and even in his last hours, his miserliness causes the box to be placed as a pillow for him (p. 249). This is sad because it is stinginess gone to a far degree—and still it's humorous, for in that stingy rigidity, there is comedy. Then, as if this were not enough, Barkis's last words are "Barkis is willin'" (p. 430), that identifying mark of the man which the reader previously could not read without laughing. We smile at the words but simultaneously realize that he is now dead, and we are at a closed door: it cannot be a laughing smile but a sad one, perhaps even guilty.

There are other examples of this "trickery". We smile at David's exalting of Steerforth and say to ourselves that little David will someday find out that his hero is not perfect. But must he find out in such a devastating way—with Emily's downfall, Mr.

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<sup>1</sup>James R. Kincaid, "Dickens' Subversive Humor: *David Copperfield*," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, XXII (March, 1968), 321-322.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1943), p. 299. All subsequent references to this book will be taken from this edition.

Peggoty's tedious searching, Ham's misery and drowning, and finally Steerforth's death? On a less grand scale, we figure Julia Mills to be an essentially good character although rather taken with Memory, Miss Mills "having been unhappy in misplaced affection, and being understood to have retired from the world on her awful stock of experience, but still to take a calm interest in the unblighted hopes and loves of youth" (p. 466). So, Miss Mills feels she is the only one who can fully understand David and Dora. Her exotic verbosity is funny at first, dwelling on the "gushing fountains which sparkle in the sun," "the oasis in the desert Sahara," "the slumbering echoes in the cavern of Memory" (p. 468), and "Affection's Dirge" (p. 470). But we eventually discover that her absorbing interest in David and Dora is not out of real concern for them, but that "she had a dreadful luxury" in their afflictions (p. 536), and while the couple was overwhelmed in grief, "Miss Mills enjoyed herself completely" (p. 537). Her guilt is sealed when she is later found to be Jack Maldon's companion (p. 849).

But the strongest example of Dickens' "trickery" is found in his characterization of Dora. She and Doady are the classic young lost-in-love lovers, Dora cooing and demanding, David adoring and giving in to every demand. They soon become the inexperienced couple, doing anything but ruling their own house. But even after marriage, Dora never grows up. She continues to exist in her own dreamy, impractical world. The humor, again, is in rigidity—in Dora's insistence that she can't do anything practical, and in David's insistence that she must learn. But such a situation cannot continue pleasantly for very long. Indeed, the longer it continues, the more pathetic it gets, and the more frustrating it becomes for David: he finally must face reality, and that reality is no longer funny. Along with David, the reader eventually decides not to demand anything of Dora nor to expect anything serious from her. This is most unfortunate for the intelligent and aspiring David. Thus, Dickens almost totally reverses an originally comic situation. Then he com-

pletes the reversal: Dora does indeed do something very serious—she dies. Her death is intensified by the fact that we had originally laughed at her. Now that she is gone, and we stand outside a locked door, we feel guilty for not having pitied her sooner. But I believe that Dickens did not prepare us to feel pity for her. It is yet another instance of how he builds the tragic upon a comic foundation before we really have a chance to see where he is taking us.

Within the events just described, there are numerous instances of “ambiguous invitations” wherein the reader may laugh but realize that it is laughter based on a serious problem. For instance, obsessions make us laugh. Mr. Dick and King Charles the First are inseparable. The King is always getting into poor Dick’s great Memorial, and this, of course, creates havoc with his papers, leading to the manufacture of more and more kites. Now, Dick is a lovably comic figure because of this very obsession, but in the back of the reader’s mind is always the knowledge that Dick is mad, that he would not be what he is if it weren’t for Aunt Betsey, and that there is the possibility that his threatening family might put him in an asylum. Thus, King Charles is a constant reminder of not only Dick’s comicality but also his serious plight. The same thing occurs in the case of Tom Traddles “who was the merriest and most miserable of all boys” (p. 88). We remember Tommy as Mr. Creakle’s whipping boy who withstands all attacks on his person by drawing skeletons:

He never said who was the real offender, though he smarted for it next day, and was imprisoned so many hours that he came forth with a whole churchyard of skeletons swarming all over his Latin Dictionary. (p. 88)

The peculiar preoccupation is humorous, and every time the skeletons pop up, we laugh at this odd way of letting out one’s frustrations. But there again is the ambiguity—laughter founded upon poor Traddles’ facing continual beatings. This behavior is so rooted in him

that even after Traddles' happy marriage, David still finds him drawing skeletons (p. 822). In Dr. Strong, too, we have a pre-occupation with the Dictionary, and although it is a perfectly good and harmless endeavor, it serves as a gentle, and sometimes humorous, indicator of Strong's absorption in academe while not fully understanding his wife's unhappy position.

This obsession factor leads further into Dickens' famous catchphrase technique based on the monopolylogues of Charles Matthews. These lines, because they are repeated so often and identify the characters so succinctly and so readily, are a constant source of humor. Yet the very fact that they do arise in conversation so much reveals states of mind that are quite lacking in serenity, and are more in the realm of loneliness, insecurity, and self-deception: Mrs. Gummidge's "I'm a lone, lorn creetur"; Aunt Betsey's "Janet! Donkeys!"; Miss Mowcher's "Ain't I volatile?"; and Mrs. Micawber's "I will never desert Mr. Micawber!" Of course, the most memorable of these is Mr. Micawber's "in short—". He can talk himself into or out of any situation, and by so doing, he implicates others, such as poor Traddles, in his problems, while neatly shirking the family responsibilities that should rest on him alone. And all of this is compactly symbolized in his "in short—," which invariably summarizes his brink-of-chaos speeches. Thus, all these characters "have their flat goodness and comicality expanded with an insistent note of seriousness and darkness."<sup>1</sup>

Finally, there is the set of distasteful characters who are not goodly funny in themselves; however, Dickens naturally zeroes in on a characteristic about them which, although not exactly comic, is still humorous. The methods already discussed regarding the previous *Copperfield* personae are opposite from the method used with these characters. In the former, a hospitable invitation is extended to the reader, and only after we accept that invitation to laugh, do we see

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<sup>1</sup>Kincaid, *op cit.*, p. 324.

its serious implications. But in the method used with the unpleasant characters, our initial reaction may be one of suspicion and may indeed develop into contempt. Yet at the same time, Dickens' skill in description redeems them from being outside the realm of humor. For instance, Miss Murdstone's firmness is lethal to David's mother, but in describing her hard-core nature, Dickens is supremely funny:

When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was. (p. 46)

Mr. Creakle, also, as cruel as he is to the boys, is quite funny when in tandem with his interpreter, Tungay. And Mr. Spenlow, as cheating as he is in business matters, is funny in his constant referral to, and quiet abuse of, Mr. Jorkins. The prime example is in Uriah Heep. Throughout the book, the description of his individual characteristics plus David's reaction to them is grotesquely funny—his writhing, his clammy hands, his lack of eyebrows, his “umbleness”—but combining them all together in the one person of Heep is utterly repulsive. So Heep and the other disagreeable characters are dealt with in the distinctive Dickens manner: their deliberate actions would normally put them outside of comedy but the description of their persons brings them into the circle of his humor.

In evaluating Dickens' deception of the reader, I suspect that Dickens was essentially a superficial writer. Indeed, he did see and hear more than most people, but the seeing and hearing ended with just that. The natural outcome of this is his tagging almost every character with a peculiar trait, usually humorous. We rarely get information beyond the physical and obvious, making it impossible to truly understand a character. It is difficult for us to react consistently to that character for we can't really grasp him or her. However, by this, I do not mean that Dickens was false to his

reader or false to reality. On the contrary, he saw too much, and because of that, it seems that nothing could be pure mirth to him, and the initially comic characters could not be permitted to stay wholly in the realm of entertainment. They all have a touch of pathos about them: Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, Mr. Dick, Julia Mills, Traddles, Barkis, Dora. And by the same token, many unsavory characters are redeemed. Although not at the center of comedy, they stand at its rim because of Dickens' sheer skill in detecting the comic in the least likely places: the Murdstones, Mr. Spenlow, Mr. Creakle, Uriah. So Dickens may not have analyzed his characters for us as to why they acted the way they did, but this does not annul their reality. Rather, Dickens perceived a great deal more reality than many do. His readers simply must expect to find the comic in the tragic and the tragic in the comic: that is the way life is.