

# On Charles Dickens' Concerns about Children Development in David Copperfield

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**Abstract:** Charles Dickens is a great 19th century writer. His works constitute a realistic reflection of the social conditions of that time. *David Copperfield* is the author's favorite into which he draws a lot from his childhood experiences. This paper is aimed at exploring his deep concerns about children development in it. Through the narration of David's miserable childhood, Dickens exposes to readers the deteriorating social, family and school environment for children's physical and mental health, and also proposes some suggestions. This exploration is sure to urge modern people's concerns and improvement of children development.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens; *David Copperfield*; Concerns; Children Development

## 1. Introduction

Charles Dickens, a critical realist, is one of the greatest critical realist writers and is the most popular English novelist of the Victorian Age. Social criticism is a hallmark of all Dickens' works. He is supremely humane and keenly sensitive to the problems of his age and the plight of his people. He crafts complex plots and striking characters that capture the panorama of English society. He has a serious intention to expose and criticize all the poverty, injustice, hypocrisy and corruptness he sees all around him.

Almost every period of British history has this kind of excellent works that concern about children developing problems, while the period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Victorian is characterized by Dickens' works like *Oliver Twist*, *The Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield*, etc. Dickens throws much concerns on children development. Children characters under his pen are representatives of the low-class and disadvantaged groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society. He wrote many books to expose the darkness of the society, especially the cruel treatment to children of that age, like *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, in which Dickens narrates David's childhood to uncover the children development problems in that society. He throws much concerns on children development. *David Copperfield* is the embodiment of Dickens' concerns about children development. Children development refers to the biological and psychological changes that occur in human beings between birth and the end of adolescence, as the individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy<sup>[1]</sup>. The mutual effect of family, school and society plays a vital part in children development. The discussion of children development has become a literature issue, and plays a critical role in British literature<sup>[2]</sup>.

Dickens writes *David Copperfield*, uncovering many children-development problems, in hope to help the public realize the problems of children development of his age. He shows his concerns about children development in the book and also puts forward some suggestions to it. Hopefully, He cries for the public's concerns about children development. This paper explores Dickens' concerns and suggestions about children development in this novel in hope to raise the public's awareness of children physical and mental care.

## 2. Dickens' exposure of the existing children-development problems in his narration of Copperfield's childhood experiences

*David Copperfield* is the only novel that mirrors Dickens' own personal life and experiences. The hero David's childhood is another version of his suffering past put onto pages. In effect, it is written

according to the history of his own emotion because once he says, "I am within three pages of the shore, and am strangely divided...if I were to say half what 'Copperfield' makes me feel tonight, how strangely...I seem to be sending some part of myself into the shadowy world" <sup>[3]</sup>. Many plots within this novel follow events in Dickens' own child life like their same working experiences at childhood in factory. David's childhood is the presentation of Dickens, even the two capital letters "D and C" in the name David Copperfield are the reverses of "C and D" in the first two letters in Charles Dickens. There are many similarities between Dickens and David's childhood, which is another version of Dickens' suffering past put onto pages, and also in *David Copperfield* we can realize Dickens' exposure of the existing children-development problems at that age.

### **2.1 The lack of family's love and care for children**

A good saying goes, "Family is the cell of a society", which means that family bears great significance to the society and the concordance constructed by a family has vital effects on the society. Family is the cradle of the growth of children who are the future of the whole society. Family is the hinge of children development. Parents should not only supply children with the basic materials, but also provide them with the need of emotional caring. However, David has a nightmarish childhood and can not have a warm family. He is living in a malformal family relationship. He does not have the caring from the family, instead he has to bear the persecution by his step-father. Born into a family in want of parental emotional response, David has harboured deep inside his heart a desire for family love and care, especially from his mother, which we can sense from David's dependence on Agnes.

The same to David, Dickens has to be a children laborer at 12 years old, in hope to support his family. When he is working, many children at his same age watch and observe Dickens' every working movements and look down upon him. That impairs Dickens' dignity greatly <sup>[4]</sup>. Dickens eventually has a chance to attend Wellington House Academy in North London. His mother at first does not agree to his returning to school, thus she does not immediately remove him from the boot-blackening factory. Dickens' father stumbles into the poor level due to his bankruptcy, which leads to immeasurable misery to Dickens. All of those experiences make Dickens have unquenchable cravings for family's love.

Both Dickens and David are in want of the family's love and care in their childhood. However, a happy and harmonious family's atmosphere and parental care are of vital importance to the social stability and are an indispensable part for children's healthy development. The family that is in want of love and care will cause huge impairment to children's traits throughout their life. Dickens' description of David's miserable childhood is aimed at pointing out the important role family plays in shaping children's personalities and characters. The public is thus supposed to pay more attention to the establishment of an integrated, healthy family for children's healthy growth.

### **2.2 The inhumane educational system in school**

Schools are the places for children education. Schools should assume the responsibility of offering children love and varied kinds of knowledge, like cultures etc. The Wellington House Academy established by Mr.Creakle in *David Copperfield* is not a good school with much of the haphazard, desultory teaching, poor discipline applied by the headmaster with sadistic brutality. The schools attended by little David and Dickens bear a close resemblance: the headmasters, who are called as callous "educators", show no interests in academy, but in speculative, opportunistic and cruel deeds. It's normal for them to give corporal punishment to some children in the old-style private school. The headmaster punishes David by commanding him to wear the sign around his neck which reads, "BE CAREFUL! HE BITES!" All the punishment in this kind of school would injure children deeply, physically and mentally. Dickens also expresses his deep sense of being neglected and his burning desire for education, using a passionate and rhythmical sarcasm. Dickens and David's school life are all frequently disrupted and they cannot get a healthy education, instead they are tortured by the inhumane educational system.

School is the principal place where children development takes place. Through schools, children can understand and adapt to the society, thus schools should teach them not only the skills of living, but also the abilities of distinguishing the right from the wrong and the principles of handling personal relationships. Looking through this novel, we can find Dickens' exposure of the inhumane school system. He points out that most schools are built for money instead of training great talents or the good citizens for the society. Also he criticizes the head of schools for their regarding schools as commercial business, and students as the source of earning money.

### 2.3 *The corruptive social system of that age*

Society is the environment of children education, which means that society should take the commitment of supplying a harmonious, functional, proper educational mechanism for children <sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, a good social system is in need for the welfare of children. But David can not receive a healthy development in that society. When David returns home for the holidays, he finds that his mother has a baby boy. Soon after David goes back to Salem House, his mother and her baby dies and David has to return home immediately. Mr. Murdstone sends him to work in a wine factory in London. The grim reality of the wine factory existence echoes Dickens' experience in a blacking factory. Dickens works in a warehouse at 12 years old. The strenuous, cruel work condition makes a deep impression on Dickens, and later influences his fiction and essays, forming foundation of his interest in the reform of socio-economic and labor conditions. Later in his own words, Dickens tells of his disappointment, depression and pain, "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I...The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless cannot be written" <sup>[6]</sup>. His agony as a children laborer haunts him all his life, but he never mentions it to others. He emphasizes how reticent he is about the past.

Children are the future of the world; hence an advantageous social system will guarantee children's basic rights. But in Dickens' age in England, children are driven in a condition of being condemned and enslaved. We can learn from little David as the victim of that social system in his development. Without the family's care and love, David is driven into the callous society that is filled with violence to shift for himself. There is sufficient evidence that there is a good deal of pain and cruelty in English society then. It is far from imagination how the social system misleads the perfect, kind, clever, cute children into the wrong way. They are suffering and distorted by the society mentally and physically. There is little likelihood for them to be cared and taught in a well-tended, rational way.

Dickens satirizes the darkness of that society, especially the cruel treatment of the children in the low-class groups and shows his concerns about children development in that time. Society is the place where children education takes place and beneficial social life with well development environment will produce immense benefits to children's physical and psychological development. However, at Dickens' age, the inhumane society in which the children labourer exists can not offer a healthy environment for children development.

## 3. Dickens' suggestions for children development in *David Copperfield*

Dickens uses humorous, exaggerated methods to describe every vivid children character. He describes the sorrowful settings to present us the children's wound physically and mentally hurt by the unhealthy education of the society, school and family. Dickens never recovers from his childhood experience and he understands what lies at the heart of his feeling for children, the poor, the debtors, and the unloved and outcast. He hopes his works of children can incur people's attention to the welfare of every child. Dickens criticizes vehemently the educational system and the distorted family relations that do detrimental influence to humanity. Dickens stresses children healthy development and believes that the establishment of a healthy environment for children development should have special meanings in moral and aesthetic aspects. Dickens writes many books to shows his care about children development, especially *David Copperfield* in which we can easily conceive Dickens' suggestions for children's healthy development.

### 3.1 *The cultivation of a warm and affectional family atmosphere*

In Dickens' opinion, the upshot of the children character in his novel is the result of the social environment in that age which is full of poverty, starvation, and sins, as well as the result of the absence of family affection. In order to make up the absence of healthy family education and environment, after the exposure of the darkness of the society, Dickens always makes his children characters finally find their own family where there are abound of love and caring <sup>[7]</sup>. And also in *David Copperfield*, we can easily sense that Dickens believes a child should have a healthy family atmosphere, which can be proved by the depiction of the character Mrs. Trotwood, David's aunt. She is the embodiment of loftiness and kindheartedness, and she has been a custodian for her maidservant like Jenny. David always prays that he never might be homeless any more, and never might forget the houseless. When the miserable David goes to her for a shelter, she accepts and gives David a warm home without hesitation. She helps David to bravely confront his step-father's troubles as she says, "I am here to take

David back—to take him unconditionally, to dispose of him as I think proper, and to deal with him as I think right”<sup>[6]</sup>. Her aunt always believes that family should give children love and care.

Dickens holds the view that a rational and proper family that is full of understanding and love is the best place for the function and implement of “emotional education” and “moral education” for the children. Children problems blow down to the family problem and the educational problem of the right and reasonable humanity<sup>[8]</sup>. Besides, Dickens believes that a child should be offered not only the sustained materials for the survival, like food and shelter, but also the spiritual love and care, understanding, compassion, etc. provided by the family. What’s more, children need not only the physical growth, but also the development of their mind, intelligence and emotion.

### **3.2 The development of a healthy and beneficial school and social environment**

We can find Dickens’ suggestions for children development to school and the society from *David Copperfield*. David is once born in a rich family and he yearns to learn, in hope to be an outstanding and reputable man in that snobbish, money-oriented society. David endures the mal-treatment in Salem school that he attends. The head of the school admits some special, aggressive, bully-oriented students if they pay much money to attend school. The headmaster Mr. Creakle buys the cheap scraps and leavings as their food in order to diminish the food expenditure. What is worse, as for the teaching methods, Dickens criticizes intensively the malpractice of England schools—savage physical punishment. Mr. Creakle always hits students for no exact reasons at any time with the stick in his hand. David suffers from the shame by wearing a sign around neck which reads, “BE CAREFUL! HE BITES!” All of the punishment does tremendous harms to children physically and mentally. All of that barbaric violence only leads to indignation and can not change them for the good or make them to learn knowledge. In addition, Dickens criticizes the obligations of the school due to their disappointing teaching contents. Salem school employs lots of bad-trained teachers in low salary who have little teaching experience and are not equipped well with professional knowledge. All those harmful educational systems hurts Dickens’ heart bitterly. Dickens is keenly fond of children education and he says in his speech in the charitable evening party in Birmingham that “education is the best vehicle for knowing about human social institutions mutually”<sup>[9]</sup>.

Dickens pays particular attention to the influence of educational system and teaching methods to children at that time, in hope to call people to pay attention to children development as he believes wrong, harmful education in school will result in horrifying consequences. In *David Copperfield*, Mrs. Trotwood believes family should not only give children love, but also find an excellent school for them, “This is my nephew, and I have adopted him, and I have brought him here, to put him in a school where he may be thoroughly well taught and well treated”<sup>[6]</sup>. Mrs. Trotwood offers education to David that a child should have so that David has a healthy life along the way and a bright writing career later.

What’s more, Dickens criticizes intensively the phenomenon of children labourer. He sympathizes David’s hardship at the warehouse that is a crazy old house, overrun with rats down in Blackfriars. David is always in a depressed state of mind during the work as he says, “No words can express the secret agony of my soul, when I compare my present associates with those of my happier childhood—Steerforth, Traddles and the rest. I feel my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man were crushed in my bosom”<sup>[6]</sup>. Dickens holds that children’s personality development demands an agreeable social environment. However, David’s children-labourer experience has done harm to his healthy development and David finds it hard for him to have an optimistic vision of life and world. Consequently, children development should have a favourable social environment.

## **4. Conclusion**

*David Copperfield* wrote by Charles Dickens, a critical realist, is the embodiment of Dickens’ concerns about children development. Dickens exposes to us the existing children-development problems in his narration of David’s childhood experiences. They have lots of similarities, such as the want of family’s love and care, the burning desire for a healthy atmosphere in school, the children-laborer experiences which are their indelible trauma. And Dickens also gives suggestions about children development in *David Copperfield*. This paper analyzes Dickens’ concerns about children development in *David Copperfield* and illustrates the realistic meanings to us modern people.

“Children-development problems play the major part in all Dickens’ works”<sup>[10]</sup>. Through the

depiction of the childhood of David Copperfield and the analyses of his life, Dickens manages to make the public of his age realize that children's development is directly connected with the *combined* effort from families, school and social institutions. He points out through his works that children should have a warm family and a favorable school education and a humanistic society environment.

Children, as the future of a nation, are relevant to a nation's destiny and prospect. Therefore, we can say that the attention paid to children development just cannot be more. Dickens' concerns about children development in *David Copperfield* have some realistic meanings to us modern people. A harmonious family that spills over love, caring and understanding can shape children's personalities in a positive way. An advantageous environment provided by the society can make a conductive effect on children, and the functional and children-oriented teaching methods applied by a school will do exceptional benefits for children development. Therefore, families, school and social institutions should joint hand to offer children healthy and harmonious and humanistic surroundings for their healthy and happy development.

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