

CHAPTER FOUR

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens was born on the 7th February 1812 at Portsea, near Portsmouth, where his father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. From Portsea the family moved to Chatham when Dickens was three years old; his father had been promoted and was now at the government dockyard there. For a few years all went well. The family had two servants, one of them named Mary Weller, used to tell Dickens horrifying stories, which gave him nightmares.

His father John Dickens, lived consistently beyond his means, got hopelessly into debt, and was recalled to London. Charles, ignorant of the desperate circumstances of his family, followed and found them living in one of the poorest streets. In February 1824 his father was arrested for debt and taken to the Marshalsea Prison. The family situation was now almost critical; there was no money to buy bread and the boy was forced to pawn his precious books one by one. But worse was to come-an experience, so bitter and humiliating that it continued to haunt him throughout his life. His parents found a job for him in Warren's Blacking Factory owned by a relative. For six months, in utter despair, Charles, still more than a child, worked in the dirty, rat infested old house, sticking labels of blacking bottles. This was the first raw impact of life on the sensitive nerves of a boy who had lived in dream world. From a psychological point of view, the boy experienced a sense of complete betrayal by those from whom he expected love and protection.

After leaving the factory, Charles resumed his schooling at Wellington House Academy. But the mischief had been done. In the depth of his nature a split had occurred; a sensitive, delicate boy had been plunged into experiences that could only have been endured by somebody tough and obstinate. The vision of a world of grim, twisted shapes, deformed, exaggerated caricatures, a world full of horrid images, impressed itself permanently upon the soul of a child. It was thus that

he always continued to see the Victorian Scene. Loving beauty, he had during his childhood had been forced into contact with the seamier, side of life, with dirt, squalor, shame and humiliation. The resulting disgust and utter hopelessness were ineradicable.

Indeed, Dickens own childhood experiences and memory was very bitter and poignant. He had himself faced the cruel blows of time and felt loneliness and depression. So he developed the victim of society who was usually a child and got immense popularity.

The novel, *David Copperfield* which is considered as the autobiography of Dickens, tells how the boy's character was tried, his mind shaped, his imagination fed by all the different things that befall him-the things that befall Dickens. The neglect and indifference undergone from his own people, the responsibility being transferred, however, to an imaginary step father, the inadequate spell of schooling, the heart breaking experiences at the blacking warehouse very slightly disguised, the wanderings in the London streets, the keen eyed observation, the companionship with unsavoury character, even the prison scenes in which the family of Dickens had figured, only with the substitution of the king's bench in the Borough for the Marshal sea. David, like Dickens, was ten years old when he escaped from the warehouse and was put to school.

The dread that he might grow up ignorant and unfit for a decent manhood, the anxiety about his education which troubled David as much as his physical sufferings, no doubt afflicted Dickens too. Dickens too had undergone the same miseries and agonies, and like David, without being demoralized or embittered. David would fain have blotted it all out :—

“No one has ever raised that curtain since I have lifted it for a moment, even in this narrative, with a reluctant hand, and dropped it gladly. The remembrance of that life is fraught with so much pain to me, with so much mental suffering and want of hope, that I have never had the courage even to examine how long I was doomed to lead it. Whether it lasted for a year, or more or less, I do not know. I only know that it was, and ceased to be; and that I have written, and there I leave it.” (Collins Phillip)

Dickens portrayed counterpart as a high strung, very intelligent, observant and studious boy, who fortunately comes across a collection of excellent books which he devours. These are the books which Dickens read before he left Chatham to go to London and warehouse.

David Copperfield is written in the form of an autobiography, and the skill with which it is unfolded goes a long way towards justifying the presentation of David as a successful novelist. David Copperfield had proved to be the favourite child of Dickens who discloses the whole story of his life. G.K. Chesterton says that in David Copperfield. Dickens has created creatures who cling to us and tyrannize over us, creatures whom we would not forget if we could, ‘Creatures who are more actual than the

man who made them'. It means that David represents more original experiences of Dickens child life.

It's autobiographical content is unmistakable, and there is the inevitable feeling that we are being privileged to come much closer in this work than elsewhere to Dickens the man : that is in a way David is Dickens.

It was at the suggestion of his friend and biographer, Forster, that Dickens agreed to adopt the autobiographical method of narration and used the first person pronoun 'I' for the purpose. However, *David Copperfield* is not merely autobiographical in form, it is also autobiographical in substance. Even the initials of the hero of the novel are the initials of Dickens himself, though in an inverted form. Dickens has put more of himself in this novel than in any other of his creations. It is a faithful record, though often mixed with much that is fictitious, of the novelist's own experiences of life.

David Copperfield is an autobiographical novel of Charles Dickens where he seems to be reviewing his own bad experiences as a labouring child in the workhouse or as a student in the school. *David Copperfield* belongs to the tradition of projective novels where surface life reflects the inner self. Dickens, in this novel, has summed up the most anguished memories of youth — his wretched job in a blacking warehouse, his rejection by Maris Beadnell and his earlier defeat at home.

David Copperfield is Dickens's most personal book. The point of its genesis is the autobiographical fragment which describes Dickens' early life and his painful experiences as a blacking factory drudge. In it, he has contemplated in fictional form, the painful rejection and isolation which he experienced as a child.

The fictional alteration of the autobiographic facts enable Dickens to transform the jealousy which a boy feels by the entrance of a step father, in his mother's love. Writing to John Forster on 10th July from Broadstairs, Dickens explained that he had fused his traumatic memories of the blacking factory into the tale of young David. "I really think I have done it ingeniously" he wrote, "and with a very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction. Thus having found the way to weave fact and fantasy from such emotionally sensitive material, he went on to do the same for other painful and almost suppressed memories, including the unsatisfied yearning to be the favourite, wanted child, which he made the agony of David's boyhood.

Little David in the novel works at the menial job of washing bottles in the firm of Murdstone and Grinsby. He has to work for long hours and has to suffer much hardship, misery and humiliation as a consequence. Dickens suffered there as David suffers in the novel. Doctor Strong's School at Canterbury, is the embodiment of all that passionate desire for education with which the little labouring mind in the blacking

warehouse had so desperately wept as Dickens felt crushed within his breast all his “early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man.” Their prototypes Mr. Jones and the inky schoolmaster at Wellington House were the visions of what Dickens had longed for and never had. Dickens was unable to resist the temptation to portray his schooling as fuller and less fragmentary than it was. Like little David, again he had to quit the school after a brief stay and take up a menial job.

Hard upon the exile, when David goes at work, Dickens’ actual parents reappear, disguised as Mr. and Mrs. Micawber. Behind the details of Micawber’s portrayal are huddled many of the darker shadows of Dickens’ unhappy childhood. They are poor as Dickens’ own parents were and like them the Micawbers, too, have to support a large family. Micawber’s optimism, his shiftlessness, his irresponsibility, his grandiloquent way of speaking, were also the leading traits of the Character of Dickens’ father. The Micawber’s like Dickens’ own parents have frequently to pawn their household goods. They are constantly in debt and their creditors come to them at all hours. Mr. Micawber’s incarceration in the king’s Bench Prison is John Dickens’ imprisonment in the Marshalsea and David pawning books and spoons in the city road is Dickens’ disposing of the ‘library’ and family’s poor scraps of silver. Dickens went to visit his father in the prison: little David also visits

Micawber in the same manner. Dickens was lodged near the prison, so also is David. Dickens' father got the benefit of the insolvent Debtor's Act, and was released, Mr. Micawber, too, is released in a like manner. Dickens must have suffered much to see his father, in Jail. In the novel, David's suffering is softened a little, for he stands in a different relationship with the Micawbers. Mr. Micawbers, like his father, is negligent and irresponsible in his own affairs, but he is quite laborious and painstaking and sincere in his efforts to help others.

John and Elizabeth Dickens' delightful personalities seem to have been the models for David's friends, the Micawbers, while Dickens created for David a wicked stepfather, Mr. Murdstone — a worthy target for the anger that still boiled deep in Dickens's heart.

The school where Dickens was sent to, Wellington House, was run by a cruel headmaster who liked to beat boys- much like Mr. Creakle at Salem House, where David begins school. Whereas David later gets a good education from Dr. Strong, Charles had to make with the little he learned at Wellington House. Charles was resentful, sensing that he had talent and feeling thwarted by his inferior education. He went to work first as a clerk in the lawyer's office, and then dissatisfied with law, learned shorthand so that he could get a job taking down the debates in Parliament for a newspaper that published transcripts of them. David Copperfield also does it.

When he was seventeen, Dickens fell in love with Maria Beadnell, who by all accounts, was as winsome and flirtatious as David Copperfield's sweetheart, Dora. Maria's father, a banker apparently disapproved of Dickens, and after a couple of years, he sent his daughter abroad to separate them, just as Dora's father threatens to do in David Copperfield. Maria showed no interest in Charles after her return, and he felt crushed. In describing David Copperfield's Courtship of Dora, Dickens may have been relieving his infatuation with Maria and in David's marriage to Dora, Dickens may have been speculating on what could have happened if he had married Maria.

Hurt by Maria's rejection, Dickens threw himself into hard work. Then began another courtship, this time with Catherine Hogarth, he was so desperate to settle down that he didn't judge his prospective bride carefully for they were not really suited for one another in the long run. David's disappointment with his "child-wife" Dora may be realistically drawn from Charles eventual discontent with the woman he did marry- dull, sweet Catherine.

But before he could get married, Dickens, like David had to work furiously to set himself up in his career.

Indeed, David Copperfield gave Dickens an opportunity to be more personal, to write about his own life and explore individual human nature rather than society as a whole. At the time Dickens wrote David

Copperfield, Dickens was popular, admired, famous, and rich just as David Copperfield is at the end of the novel.

Thus in the novel much that is fictitious mingles with much that is autobiographical. Fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, reality and imagination jostle with each other. Dickens has intentionally falsified and softened the harshness of reality, so as to avoid disgrace for his parents and humiliation for himself. He has tried to throw the readers off the scent by concealing the facts of his life under the cloak of fiction.

However, many of the fictitious events of the novel may be interpreted as objective presentation of emotional experiences. For example, David's flight from the firm of Murdstone and Grinsby may be taken to be a representation of a similar flight of which Dickens must have frequently dreamed, when the horrors of his menial life were too much for him. Betsy Trotwood may be taken to be the longed fairy god-mother. Indeed, Mr. Murdstone, Miss Murdstone and Mr. and Mrs. Micawber may be said to represent the different facets of his parents' personality as they must have appeared to the suffering child. David's education with Dr. Strong, his marriage first with Dora and then with Agnes, may all be interpreted as examples of wish fulfilments. What Dickens could not enjoy in life, he enjoys vicariously in the novels. *[Since emotional states are greater realities, the fictitious in the novel acquires a new significance and meaning].*

While Dickens humiliating childhood experiences are not directly described in *A Christmas Carol*, his conflicting feelings for his father as a result of these experiences are principally responsible for the dual personality of the tale's protagonist — Ebenezer Scrooge. In 1824, Dickens' father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea and twelve-year-old Charles was forced to take lodgings nearby, pawn his collection of books, leave school, and accept employment in blacking factory. The boy had a deep sense of class and intellectual superiority and was entirely uncomfortable in the presence of factory workers who referred to him as “the young gentleman”. He developed nervous fits when his father was released at the end of a three month stint, young Dickens was forced to continue working in the factory, which only grieved and humiliated him further. He despaired of ever recovering his former happy life. The devastating impact of the period wounded him psychologically, coloured his work, and haunted his entire life with disturbing memories. Dickens both loved and demonized his father, and it was this psychological conflict that was responsible for the two radically different Scrooges in the tale—one Scrooge, a cold, stingy, and greedy semi-recluse and the other Scrooge, a benevolent, sociable man whose generosity and goodwill towards all men earn for him a near saintly reputation.

In *Oliver Twist* Dickens provides an idealized portrait of a boy so inherently and unrealistically ‘good’ that his values are never subverted

by either brutal orphanages or coerced involvement in a gang of young pickpockets. Oliver Twist turns out to be the lost nephew of the upper class family that randomly rescues him from the dangers of the pickpocket group. To Dickens these were not just plot devices but an index of a Christian humanism that led him to believe that “good” wins out in the end, often in unexpected ways. Looking at this theme from a biographical context, Dickens life against many odds, led him from a disconsolate child forced to work long hours in a bottle factory at age 12 to his status as the most popular novelist in England by the age of 27.

Oliver Twist’s portrait of a Victorian workhouse London’s criminally infested underbelly, and the plight of orphaned and abandoned children takes aim at social injustice, if only in an anecdotal, less than penetrating way. There is also an autobiographical element since Dickens himself was sent to work in a London factory, when he was twelve owing to his father’s confinement in Marshalsea debtor’s prison.

Like most of Dickens’s work, Oliver Twist too has autobiographical elements that can be easily traced throughout the novel. The description of the workhouse, the circumstances of dire poverty and the themes of child labour are reflection of Dickens’s own early youth as a child labourer.

David Cody in his essay “*Autobiographical Elements in Dickens’ Great Expectations*”, has rightly argued that—

“It is impossible to read *Great Expectations* without sensing Dickens’ presence in the book, without being aware that in portraying and judging Pip he is giving a glimpse of his younger self. In it he explores and perhaps exercises the sense of guilt and shame that had haunted him all his life, as he rose, from humble beginnings to success, wealth and fame; and chronicles his own at first ambivalent and then cynical response to the Victorian response on gentility.”

Nicholas Nickleby’s father and Wilkins Micawber are certainly Dickens’ own father, just as Mrs. Nickleby and Mrs. Micawber are similar to his mother and the snobbish nature of Pip from *Great Expectations* is similar to author himself.

With *Great Expectations* Dickens returned to familiar scenes. The instinct that sent Dickens back to this world of his childhood was more than the desire to have an appropriate setting for his story. It came from some deeper need to explore once again, more profoundly even than he had been able to do in *David Copperfield* his formative years and the bent they had given to him, to weigh the nature of his response to them and discover what it revealed. *Great Expectations* show no trace of *David Copperfield*’s self-pity. It pierces down in self understanding.

Great Expectations is Dickens’s penance for his subservience to false values. The blacksmith and “the taint of prison and crime” which have so mortified Pip, and of which he comes to feel a remorseful humiliation at ever having been ashamed, are the blacking warehouse of

Mr. Dickens in the character of a blacksmith's boy may be regarded as an apology to mealy potatoes.

In love, too, Pip's *Great Expectations* like Dickens own have been disappointed and deceived. The whole area of Pip's relationship to Magwitch was of course, a personally sensitive one for Dickens, for more than one reason in the blacking factory at the age of twelve he had shuddered away from vulgar small boys, and it was the boy who showed him the most personal kindness, whose name was later bestowed on Fagin in *Oliver Twist*.

Dickens mainly wrote about orphans because he felt abandoned by his parents as a child. His father John Dickens was imprisoned in Marshalsea Prison for debt in 1824, and Dickens was forced to labour at Warren's Blacking Factory, which was a damaging psychological experience in itself, but his mother compounded the injury when she insisted that he continue working there, even after the debtor's prison released his father. In *Great Expectations*, Pip is left an orphan while his older sister and her husband serve as his substitute parents. Pip does not have a high opinion of his older sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery.

Dickens never fully forgave his parents, and they would appear as characters in unflattering incarnations in his works. His father would remain destitute and his family would repeatedly be after him for money. His father's artlessness with finances compounded with his mother's

domineering personality probably made Dickens view his father as weak and at least psychologically castrated, which Joe reflects in his hen-pecked position. In *Great Expectations* Mrs. Joe wore the pants in the household, while Joe serves as an effete and effeminate child like figure.

Jean Carr is so right in pointing out “Despite ... his fear of releasing too much of himself, Dickens had a pressing autobiographical urge. He was ever, longing to express ... recollections of his own childhood, which were his great Storehouse.”

“The blacking factory episode explains why we so often find at the centre of his novels the figure of the last, persecuted, or helpless child: *Oliver Twist*, David Little Nell, Paul Dombey, Pip and their near relations.”

Alexander Welsh similarly argues —

“The secret memory of the blacking warehouse explains a great deal in Dickens’s life and fiction. It explains the vein of self-pity that crops up again and again in the novels, and particularly the childlike sentiment that if he had died or turned bad, it would have served the grown ups right.”

Thus, it would not be wrong to say that of all Dickens, Works *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* are considered to be his most autobiographical. Philip Collins writes, “*Great Expectations* indeed though overtly less autobiographical than *David Copperfield*, is a more searching and self-critical account of Dickens own inner impulses.” In

some cases, Dickens own life history is so closely linked with his fiction, that in order to understand Dickens' interest in the child character, it is critical to be familiar with the major events of his life, as well as how he viewed childhood in general.

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