

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN DAVID COPPERFIELD

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ABSTRACT

The biography or memoirs of a person written by him or herself is called an autobiography. It contains "a continuous narrative of the major events of his past". Some autobiographies start from the childhood but some others are different. The growth of autobiography in the West has gone hand in hand with that of the novel. There are many novels which are either autobiographies in disguise or borrow the autobiographical form of confession. These are called fictional autobiographies. Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre Charles Dickens's David Copperfield and J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye are well-known examples of fictional autobiographies.

Keywords: *Autobiography, Novel, Confession, Charles Dickens, Adolescence.*

Introduction

Charles Dickens, a famous Victorian novelist, wrote about fifteen major novels and many short stories and sketches. He was a subjective novelist and drew the material of his novels greatly from his experiences and acquaintances. In most of his novels, therefore, we get a glimpse of Dickens, the man; but David Copperfield, the most admired of his novels, is also the most autobiographical. In his works we see the impact of his personal life. The purpose of this article is to study the autobiographical elements in his two novels David Copperfield and Great Expectations.

David Copperfield is a masterpiece of Charles Dickens. In this novel he has successfully blended the fictitious elements with autobiographical ones. He is not interested in presenting the bare facts since it would disgrace his parents and would mean humiliation for himself. Under the cloak of affection, he has represented the bare facts of his life in an artistic manner. There is an objective presentation of emotional experiences of the novelist himself.

When Dickens was writing this novel David Copperfield he was emotionally strained. In the Preface to David Copperfield Dickens writes that no one can love their children any more dearly than he loves his own. The fondness for this child of his fancy, as he called it was partly due to the fact that the novel was reminiscent of his own early life and the novelist has tried to colour the experiences of his childhood, boyhood and adolescence with the help of his imagination and presented them as a real picture.

It has been suggested by many critics that the secret of this overwhelming charm is the autobiographical element in the story. There is an atmosphere of personal devotion and identification in everything he says about this novel. Describing his feelings as he came to the end of David Copperfield, Dickens said, "I seem to be sending some part of myself into the shadowy world". After finishing the novel, the novelist remarked that he liked it best of all his books. The book is not an autobiography exactly but it exhibits the parallels between the careers of Charles Dickens and David Copperfield, D.C. is C.D. reversed.

In this novel, the novelist is reflected in the central character (David) of the novel. It is a tribute to Dickens veracity and to the realism of Dickens that he tells the boy's story as a boy would tell it. The novel was written in the first person, as the story of a child called David, whose very name is reminiscent

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of the writer's own initials. It is the story of the ups and downs in a child's life and therefore the greater part of the novel is taken up with the description his child life. It is interesting to note how often it is a child - terrified unwanted, helpless and persecuted - who is at the heart of Dickens's novels. Most of these children, Oliver Twist, Pip, David and Bill Smokey owe their charm and reality to the personal experiences of their creator who himself had suffered at the hands of a cruel social setup when he was a child. The experiences of young David the tenderness and safety of maternal affection, the - strange universe containing such wonders as geese and crocodiles, grave yards and cathedrals, etc. all these have their origin in the personal experiences of Dickens himself. Moreover, Dickens's childhood unhappiness and sense of rejection and the misery and heartbreak of his love for Maria Beadnell have been laid bare in the guise of David's experiences.

The details of David's visit to the jail are the same as those of Dickens himself. Only the effect is softened by changing David's relationship to the Micawbers, while to Dickens these experiences were very humiliating. Dickens is not unfair to the virtues of his parents, even while describing their weaknesses. Micawber, though in debt and difficulties is neither lazy nor incompetent.

The novelist has infused autobiographical elements in the schooling of David Copperfield. Dickens was twelve years old when he went to Willington House Academy. It was owned by a Welshman called Jones who was very fond of using the rod. In the novel, Salem House School is modelled on Willington House Academy and Mr. Creakle on Mr. Jones, though, the cruelties are somewhat exaggerated in the novel. As far as the ages for schooling are concerned they are different. David was only eight or nine when he went to Salem House while Dickens was twelve. In the novel Dr. Strong's School reminds us of William Giles's school in Catham where Dickens spent his happy time. It also reveals his passionate desire for education and real learning. Like Dickens himself David is put to work by his step father at the age of ten.

In 1827, Dickens left school to go into a lawyer's office as an office boy, not as an articled pupil. David also goes lawyer's office after leaving school but he is articled. David like Dickens learnt shorthand and became a reporter in parliament. He also sent contributions to periodicals and this enabled him to supplement his income. Dickens knew Doctors Commons very well while he was working as a reporter. David wrote books which were published and he became a famous writer in his later life. Many of the characters in the novel are derived from actual life. In some cases the originals were recognized and they protested against Dickens's description of their physical deformities, so that the novelist had to compensate by dropping the character at the point of the narrative.

David's married life with Dora was a reflection of Charles Dickens's married life in which there was something lacking. David-Agnes episode is derived from his idealized memories of Mary Hogarth and gave the novelist a sense of compensation and a feeling of aesthetic satisfaction. The love episodes with Dora and Agnes represent the two phases of Dickens's own life love. Dora is drawn after his first love, Maria Beadnell and Agnes is drawn from his idealized memories of Mary Hogarth.

Some of Dickens's works were written abroad. In 1844, he visited Italy and in 1846 Switzerland, where he wrote *Dombey and Son*. In the novel, in chapter VIII David mentions his travels in Italy and Switzerland but the reason for his travels has no parallel in Dickens's life. Thus Dickens has mixed facts with imagination, thereby weaving real incidents of life with imagined episodes. The novel is not thus a pure autobiography but it is autobiographical in inspiration.

Some biographers say that David is Dickens. But we need not identify them so closely. Dickens made some parallel between the two and used this to bring in ideas and description of some of his own personal experiences. The autobiographical details are thus not thrust in obtrusively but are part and parcel of the whole story. The novel can tell us more about Dickens than his biographers. Thus it can be said that there is some similarity in the careers of Charles Dickens and David Copperfield, but they are far from being identical. Like David Copperfield, *Great Expectations* also portrays Dickens's bitter experiences in his childhood in the character of Pip. There is a lot of resemblance and difference in the position and circumstances of both the characters (David and Pip).

In the novel, Pip tries to behave like a gentleman when he visits Miss Havisham's house and feels humiliation when he is asked to tell about his profession. Estella, Havisham's adopted child, made fun of Pip for having coarse hands and she ridiculed him for wearing thick boots. She behaved arrogantly towards him all the time as if he were a dog. Pip felt humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended and angry. It was with great difficulty that he could prevent himself from bursting into tears. This visit had a profound effect on Pip. He was filled with an ambition to become a "gentleman" in order to prove him worthy. In Pip's ambition Dickens reflects in own ambition to become a gentleman. In 1824, when

Dickens entered Willington House Academy his classmates would not have believed this short boy neatly dressed, happy-go-lucky fellow had recently roamed the streets, he always smiled and held his head high perhaps to appear taller. Moreover, he decided never to tell anybody about his experiences in the Blacking Factory and behave with the other children like a cultured and sophisticated man. Philip Hobsbaum observes: "Great Expectations appears to be as a sustained exercise in self-castigation....Pip gilds over his laborious youth as a blacksmith, just as Dickens preferred to hide the lonely antecedents of his family...." (222).

In the title of the novel *Great Expectations* Dickens shows his own expectations about the future that can be fulfilled by education. That is why he lays a lot of stress on Pip's moral education because education shapes human personality and can bridge the gap between the haves and have nots. As far as the method of narration is concerned the whole story of the novel is told in the first person. The narrator is Pip, a little boy. In this way the story is written in an autobiographical form. In creating Pip's character Dickens pushed himself, with an effort wholly admirable, in a direction away from the main current of his genius.

It is an open secret that Dickens lived through a traumatic early childhood and his sufferings made an impact on his creative genius. But the novelist puts in a tremendous effort to blend fact and fiction adequately in order to present the reader with a finished work of art. Thus the autobiographical element has infused vigour and vitality and a strong note of realism into the novels and has given the characters the stamp of individuality. And through this, the novelist achieves something in the world of wish-fulfilment which he lacked due to the adversities in his life.

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