David Copperfield's Agnes
Negotiating an Ideal

by

Adam Gregory Pence

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To

The Perfect Woman

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Abstract

Traditional and modern critics have had a great deal of trouble finding a successful approach to Charles Dickens' writing. Many are dissatisfied with his style and continued use of stereotypical characters. *David Copperfield* is a perfect example of a Dickens' novel that, while popular to lay readers, leaves many academics unfulfilled. The primary reason for this disappointment lies within the character of Agnes Wickfield; Dickens gives her little text in the novel and portrays her as the epitome of perfection. There are also concerns that this novel is too personal in its autobiographical format to allow for a meaningful and critical reading of the text.

I assert that Agnes is the key to the novel and the reason David Copperfield records his history on paper. David is, in truth, attempting to negotiate his own idealization of Agnes. Narratively, this means that she will have a profound effect on many, if not all, of the minor characters within the novel. Copperfield separates his emotions and portrays them through his friends and family. In doing this, David and Dickens further Agnes' own perfection and create a universal ideal that applies to everyone. Dickens' heroine becomes the Victorian ideal, representing a perfect marriage and a flawless life. Modern critical theory dissects *David Copperfield* instead of attempting any holistic interpretation. This prevents many academics from recognizing how important the character of Agnes Wickfield is to this novel. By writing down his own recollections, David wishes to overcome the problematic idolatry his love for Agnes creates. He wants to find the tangible person behind the unexamined ideal.

I begin my examination of Agnes with an introduction to the Dickens' stereotypical character and what it means to the novel; I also distinguish the stereotype from the ideal and what this distinction means for the novel. After this, I give a brief history of traditional and modern criticism's main concerns with *David Copperfield*. My first chapter deals with the "diseased love" of Mr. Wickfield and Uriah Heep. Their relationships with Agnes are more significant than most people recognize. In my second chapter, I look at the "goodness" of Dickens' heroine and her effect on Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Micawber. Agnes represents ideals for both these characters as well. In my third chapter, I explore the dangerous and volatile connection between Agnes and David's other two ideals: Dora Spenlow and James Steerforth. When they come into contact with Agnes they become martyrs to the novel and David's memory. In some ways, Dickens' heroine represents and symbolizes these two characters' deaths. In my last chapter, I examine what all these relationships mean to David. I find that Copperfield is attempting to overcome or at least cope with his idealization for Agnes. The novel is a method of self-treatment for Dickens' narrator.

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Introduction

In 1948 F.R. Leavis excluded the entire Dickens' library, with the exception of *Hard Times*, from his Great Tradition. Leavis, like many other critics, found Dickens to be overly simplistic and lacking in the subtlety or complexity of a canonical writer. A large part of this dissatisfaction rested with Dickens' use of stereotypical personalities in his characters. The writer would often create an entire persona from an archetype. The most famous example of this is Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, the miserly old man who has no sympathy for others. Dickens wrote his story as a social commentary on the treatment of the poor in England. Yet, to examine Scrooge from a purely literary perspective, his character may appear trite and unoriginal. What many critics forget or ignore is the fact that Dickens' stereotypical characters are, above all else, the epitome of the gender and social groups to which they are fictional members. Ebenezer Scrooge (even in his name) represents the ultimate miser; the word "scrooge" is now synonymous with greed and selfishness. Characters in Dickens' novels, with the exception of certain protagonists, are behavioral and social extremes turned into fictional personalities. While they are enjoyable to readers, academics find them problematic and unconvincing.

Theorists' responses to *David Copperfield*[1] are a perfect example of such thinking. Many academics find the novel's ending incredulous and unconvincing, saying that the imperialistic and optimistic conclusion does not fit with the rest of the story. They do not understand why Dickens sends half his characters to Australia at the end, and many do not feel that David Copperfield's

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1 I will use DC for all further references to *David Copperfield.*

second marriage to Agnes Wickfield is genuine. The cynosure of much of this resistance rests with Agnes; many critics find her character hollow and unconvincing. Dickens gives her little text within the novel and describes his heroine with cryptic references to her angelic nature and perfection. Agnes, like Scrooge, is a stereotype; instead of a miser, though, she is the perfect woman. This is an important distinction from Dickens' representation of Scrooge. The image of a perfect woman is not just a stereotype, but an ideal. A stereotype is a popular image (either good or bad) about a person or persons; an "ideal" is a conception of something in its absolute perfection, a flawless standard, or a worthy principle.[2] This paragon is usually so much of an extremity that it is all-encompassing, representing an unattainable good that no person could ever possess.

While Agnes may be an incredulous representation for many readers, it is important to understand why Dickens portrays his heroine in the manner he does. Michael Slater, in his influential work, entitled *Dickens and Women*, comments that:

> For better or worse, it is she who expresses most fully Dickens's conception of the feminine ideal - not everything he knew or felt or understood about women but everything he believed female nature, at its finest and purest, to be.[3]

This idealization complicates one's reading of DC because Agnes is not just a stereotype like Scrooge. Rather, she is a symbol of perfection, which means she cannot be given a great deal of text, otherwise she will lose this flawlessness. While Scrooge is a one-dimensional miser, Agnes becomes a one-dimensional figure of excellence. One soon finds that this paragon that Dickens

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2 My definition of "ideal" is paraphrased from *Webster's New World Dictionary* (471) and *The American Heritage Dictionary* (638).

3 Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1983), p. 372.

creates is much more than a simple perfect person; Agnes represents the flawless Victorian female, which is also analogous with a perfect Victorian life. She symbolizes not just the traits of one person or one characteristic, but what many refer to as the Victorian ideal.

Perhaps the largest and most influential stereotypes in the Victorian period were those of the Victorian woman and the Victorian ideal life. People of this epoch staunchly believed that art should present an object of perfection, rather than reality. They desired the perfection and simplicity that was obviously nonexistent in everyday life, and the archetypical Victorian woman was no exception. This female paragon did not just represent a person, but an entire ideology concerning the home. It was not so much a definition of what a woman should be, but a utopian philosophy concerning the domestic. Deborah Gorham calls this the "cult of domesticity."[4] The home was an escape from reality, serving as a refuge for the male. The female's role in the family was to maintain this realm for the father or male figure. A Victorian woman was to prefer this domain to any other and expertly perform the duties required of her. She was therefore middle-class; the family was to be financially comfortable, but not so much that the wife or mother only needed to manage the servants and not take part in personally maintaining the home.

This paragon that Dickens encompasses within a single persona causes many critics and academics to view Agnes as an inflexible character with little room for interpretation. Many equate Dickens' portrayal of his heroine more along the lines of Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the

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4 Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal (Croom Helm: London, 1982), p. 4.

House" or John Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens."[5] However, Dickens does something more complicated than Ruskin or Patmore; he manipulates and plays with this paragon instead of merely emulating it. He exaggerates the Victorian ideal to a point where readers have to question the validity of Dickens' heroine. She is never discussed, but always present, fulfilling every expectation ever asked of her. While Patmore and Ruskin merely praise the perfect woman, Dickens brings her to life. Agnes is the ultimate ideal, not just an exaggerated portrayal of the rich or miserly, but representative of everything good in nineteenth-century British society.

Whether they acknowledged it or not, Agnes is an important reason traditional critics had trouble analyzing DC. The autobiographical format lacked the formal organization and sharp social criticism present in other Victorian works (and even other Dickens' novels).[6] It is especially hard to examine a character like Agnes when she is given so little text in a supposed autobiography; David is supposed to be her brother and husband, but he rarely mentions her in detail. How then, is one supposed to theorize this ideal? In 1963, Leavis commented that one of his main preoccupations was "'the challenge of Dickens' - the challenge he presents to criticism to define the ways in which he is one of the greatest writers."[7] Leavis may not have realized how correct he was in his sentiment. In the thirty years since his statement, Dickens and DC have been the subject of a great deal of literary criticism. John Peck attributes this to the modern changes in theory;

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5 Patmore writes about the perfect housewife in "The Angel in the House" dedicating the poem to his wife, "this poem is inscribed to the memory of her by whom and for whom I became a poet" (p. 60) which is reminiscent of David's own speech regarding his writing and Agnes. Ruskin depicts similar images of a mystical and perfect British wife. Both were based on stereotypes of the day but considered extreme by most readers.

6 I have paraphrased an observation by John Peck in his introduction to the critical anthology *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times*, p. 1-5.

7 F.R. Leavis, Letter to the Spectator, 4 January 1963, in Letters in Criticism, p. 96.

critical thinking turned in new directions with focuses on feminism, psychoanalysis, and social theory (like marxism). Interest in DC, and other Dickens' works, surged with these new theoretical perspectives. The notion of a perfect woman (daughter, sister, and child), a perfect family, and the middle-class work ethic fall directly under the auspices of modern theory. While traditional critics were frustrated and unsatisfied with DC, Peck notes that modern critics now see the text as

> a site where the ideological contradictions of a period are exposed, and to some extent examined, . . . [recent] critics have taken a positive view of *David Copperfield* as a text that brings to life in a vivid way Victorian confusions and assumptions about gender and personal identity.[8]

By dissecting parts of DC and other Dickens novels, modern theorists discovered what, for them, was a satisfying method of analyzing the master's works. Their specific focus in criticism matched points of emphasis within the Victorian Ideal and other Dickens' stereotypes.

While there have been breakthroughs in the critical analysis of DC, most articles and explorations are severely lacking in addressing the importance of Agnes, and the novel as a whole. There is still a great deal of confusion among academics regarding the role and function of Dickens' heroine within the novel. Social theorists, like Poovey, tend to see Agnes as a concession to the middle-class livelihood after a flirtation with the upper-class Dora (as well as controlling sexual conduct with middle-class male authority).[9] Psychoanalytic theorists, like Hirsch, salivate at the potential oedipal complex negotiation among Dora, Clara, Agnes, and

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[8] John Peck, p. 4.

[9] Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988).

David.[10] Darby, and other feminists, see the Victorian Ideal as unfair, both to Agnes and Dora (claiming both are examples of males objectifying women).[11] Structuralist and poststructuralist theorists often set up a dichotomy between waywardness and control within DC. Yet, modern criticism still fails to address the significance of Dickens' ploy in utilizing such a paragon. There have undoubtedly been many large steps in the evolution of theory on DC, but as John Kucich notes, the tradition of recent criticism does not impose uniform readings upon the novel.[12] In fact, each respective theory takes diverse readings of the text. Part of the problem is that each school of criticism focuses on different attributes of Agnes and other characters. Often, readers and critics alike fail to realize that Agnes is universally appealing, not just to their own personal method of reading.

In truth, one must look at DC holistically in order to attain any overarching understanding of the novel. Breaking down Agnes, or any other attribute, may be a good place to start an examination of DC, but one will find that everything is interconnected. This is especially true for Dickens' heroine; she is the key to reading this novel. She is a ubiquitous presence, even with the small amount of text regarding her. It is important to recognize that Agnes is an ideal not just to David, but many (if not all) of the characters within the novel. DC is a story regarding Copperfield's memory, specifically his recollections of how he comes to be with Agnes. Dickens made his heroine the ideal she is, but David must live with her and he attempts to accomplish this by negotiating the paragon of Agnes. Copperfield loves Agnes Wickfield, but he must find a way

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10 Gordon Hirsch, "A Psychoanalytic Reading of *David Copperfield*," The Victorian Newsletter, (58 Fall 1980).

11 Margaret Darby, "Dora and Doady" (Dickens Studies Annual 22, 1993), p. 155-69.

12 Peck quotes Kucich in his introduction to *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times*, p. 4.

to live with her perfection; this is the famous disciplining of his heart. First, he notices the effect she has on others within the novel and plays his own emotions and feelings off on these observations. One discovers that what we read in DC is a combination of David's observations regarding his beloved's effect on others, combined with biased exaggerations (resulting from Copperfield's own love for Agnes).

In the first three chapters of this thesis, I will examine the different and dramatic effects of Agnes on David's friends and relatives as the text presents them. This is where David, the narrator, creates the ideal of his beloved. My examination will also demonstrate how DC needs to be read with careful attention to the novel as a whole, and that Agnes is the connection between all the different characters and facets within DC. Besides these two important points, I wish to prove that DC is a novel about a young man's coming to terms with loving a woman. The narrative resolution of the novel parallels David's own resolutions about Agnes, which furthers the notion of the importance of Dickens' heroine. In my last chapter, I examine how each characters' relationship with Agnes effects David and I explore his own association with Dickens' heroine.

In some senses, Dickens is asserting that people in love do idealize their beloved and DC is an example of this. While there are many ways of coming to terms with one's infatuation, David does this by writing down and remembering his life. In Victorian fashion, Copperfield does this in a surreptitious manner, rarely using any concrete details regarding his beloved. I will discuss and examine how David addresses his feelings for Agnes through subversive references and imagery. One finds many blank and ambiguous areas within DC, especially regarding Dickens' heroine, and these blank areas are significant to the reading of the novel.

While there have been a number of essays and articles written on the ambiguity and

mystery of Agnes Wickfield, D. A. Miller and Arlene Jackson's articles are particularly helpful regarding the issue of Agnes' portrayal. Miller, in an article aptly titled "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets," does not directly address the mystery of Agnes, but the other blank and ambiguous areas within the novel. Miller explains that there are many secrets that different characters are supposed to protect. Yet, they are visible for the reader and become known to different people in the novel because of the attempt to hide them.[13] This provides an interesting beginning to my discussion regarding the ambiguity of Agnes. Miller realizes the potential importance of examining the mysterious contents of Miss Murdstone's suitcases, Barkis' money box, or the novel itself. For even David has secrets or "boxes," as Miller calls them, of his own. Agnes is not the only secret or mystery within the novel, but she does provide a connection among many of the confidences. This is fitting, for she is the biggest and most significant mystery of the novel. Miller's article also puts into perspective how valuable the secrets of DC are. One would find it ludicrous to complain of Dickens' not fully describing the contents of Miss Murdstone's suitcases. Why can he not do the same thing with Agnes? In principle, the two mysteries are the same; Agnes is just present a great deal more throughout the novel, which (according to Miller) makes it easier to discover this secret, or more appropriately, David's secret.

Jackson's article, "Agnes Wickfield and the Church Leitmotif in *David Copperfield*," specifically addresses the uneasiness of David's marriage to Agnes and his idealization of her.[14] She also addresses Alexander Welsh and J. Hillis Miller's attempts to explain Agnes' function as that of a religious symbol (they claim she is the Angel of Death). Jackson examines the different

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13 D.A. Miller, "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets" (Dickens Studies Annual 14, 1972), p. 17-37.

14 Arlene Jackson, "Agnes Wickfield and the Church Leitmotif in *David Copperfield*" (Dickens Studies Annual 9, 1981), p. 53-65.

passages where David idealizes Agnes and their effects on the novel. She claims that David's idealization is a product of his memory (which she says must be taken into account with any reading of the novel) and his memories leave him only desiring domestic bliss. Jackson also gives several helpful pieces of advice for reading and interpreting DC. She correctly points out that one must not simply attribute Agnes to biographical information within Dickens' life or his regular use of stereotypical characters, stating that

> "then we do Dickens the artist a great disservice, as we deny his ability to strike out in new directions, to go beyond autobiography, just as he was able to go beyond the stereotypical character when he so chose at this point in his development."[15]

Jackson also explains that readers must be cognizant of the fact that most Victorian males tended to idealize the female and David's portrayal is, or can be, representative of this. Jackson's last counsel is for the reader to link Agnes to David's past and the beginning of the novel, which coincides with my assertion that Dickens' heroine is ubiquitous throughout DC.

Whether it is social commentary or Dickens' observation about love, the character of Agnes is present throughout DC as an example of not only what David finds appealing, but what every character in the novel admires. One finds that Agnes is the image of perfection for everyone she meets. Dickens is, above all else, consistent with the effect of Agnes upon the other characters within the novel; it is always a profound one. It is because Dickens' heroine is this omnipresent angelic image that she becomes the key to reading DC. Many may resist this assertion, because David and Dickens rarely examine her impact and significance explicitly. Yet, by applying the ideas and theories of Miller and Jackson, we can recognize the importance of Agnes, especially to

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15 ibid., p. 56.

the novel as a whole. Copperfield ends his story by describing his beloved wife as forever "pointing upward." There has been a great deal of speculation as to what she is pointing. She is an ideal and the key to the novel; Agnes is pointing upward at one's understanding of DC when the reader raises his or her head from the page. At the same time, Agnes' pointing symbolizes David's coming to terms successfully with his second wife as he finishes writing DC.

Chapter 1 - Mr. Wickfield and Uriah Heep: A Diseased Love

Some may wonder why I do not start directly examining David and Agnes; if this is truly a novel about their relationship, this thesis should focus primarily on that association. However, David tells the reader, with the first line of the novel, that "whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by somebody else, these pages must show" (DC, 11). This a direct warning for the reader to pay a great deal of attention to other characters within the novel. If Copperfield is recalling his past to legitimize or come to terms with his relationship to Dickens' heroine, one must pay a great deal of attention to Agnes' effect on other characters. Perhaps the best place to start this examination is with the two most obvious connections to Dickens' heroine: Mr. Wickfield and Uriah Heep. One discovers that both have what Wickfield aptly calls "a diseased love" for Agnes. She becomes such a powerful and influential force for them that they turn to immoral and pathetic behavior. Agnes becomes more than a simple infatuation or obsession; she becomes the cause of their destruction and disappearance from DC.

Mr. Wickfield

Few readers or critics recognize the complete significance of Wickfield's relationship with his daughter. Dickens introduces Agnes' father with an allusion to the popular Vicar of Wakefield, a well-known character from the eighteenth century. Most Victorians would recognize the title *The Vicar of Wakefield*[16] in the name Wickfield. The similarity is, of course, intended by Dickens (to

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16 Oliver Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1908. Originally published in 1766, this is a story about a man who believes his family is only good and perfect; in a sense, he idealizes them. Unfortunately for the Vicar, his family falls into many immoral and iniquitous situations. Throughout all the family's transgressions, the vicar resolutely holds onto the perception that his family is perfect, which leads to a great deal of pain and nearly his own downfall.

this day I often say the wrong name) to force the reader to compare the two characters. Just as Agnes is Wickfield's single motive in life, the Vicar of Wakefield's single concern is his family. Dickens was reported to have taken this book to bed every night as a child.[17] This assimilation is clever on Dickens' part, because one begins to see Mr. Wickfield as a doomed figure, on the verge of suffering like the Vicar. One can also see a subtle warning for the reader and David that this obsession and idealization can be a dangerous enterprise, especially when the feelings and emotions are impure and unhealthy. When first introduced, the family appears normal, except for a widowed father (which in Dickens' and Victorian literature is quite customary). In fact, it is colloquial to claim that the widowed Mr. Wickfield cannot live without Agnes; single parents obsessing over their children is a frequent theme in Victorian literature. However, it soon becomes obvious that Wickfield's "problem" runs deeper than overprotection of his daughter. The Leavises claim that the fear of Agnes leaving drives him to drink and professional ruin.[18] Hirsch, and others, claim that Mr. Wickfield's inability to individuate himself from his daughter causes his downfall. Hirsch also asserts that Wickfield makes Agnes his "one motive in life" to counteract the grief and sense of loss from his wife's death.[19] I do not wish to argue or refute either claim; both theories have a significant amount of textual support. However, there is a great deal more to Mr. Wickfield's relationship with Agnes than the Leavises, Hirsch, or other critics admit or recognize.

To say that Wickfield does not want Agnes to leave is similar to claiming that she is simply a good housekeeper; it is a severe understatement. There are several blank and unclear areas of the

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17 Ernest Rhys, Introduction to The Vicar of Wakefield, p. ix.
18 Q.D. and F.R. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (Chatto and Windus: London, 1965), p. 81.
19 Hirsch, p. 3.

text that require examination. D.A. Miller warns readers of DC to be wary of any secrets or ambiguities within the novel; this familial relationship is full of misconceptions and mysteries. First, Agnes is not an enabler for Mr. Wickfield's alcoholism. Instead, the drinking is a symbol of the addictiveness of his daughter. In my mind, the wine is not the drug, Agnes is. She even comments that,

> I almost feel as if I had been papa's enemy, instead of his loving child. For I know how he has altered, in his devotion to me. I know how he has narrowed the circle of his sympathies and duties, in the concentration of his whole mind upon me (DC, 345).

When David describes the passages where Wickfield drinks, he is not drinking in times of depression, but in congruence with Agnes' reassuring actions that she is still with him. "Agnes set glasses for her father, and a decanter of port wine. I thought he would have missed its usual flavour, if it have been put there for him by any other hands" (DC, 214). Initially the Leavises appear correct in their interpretation that Mr. Wickfield drinks because of his restlessness concerning his daughter. However, other passages encourage a somewhat different reading.

> He was, for the most part, gay and cheerful with us; but sometimes his eyes rested on her, and he fell into a brooding state, and was silent. She always observed this quickly, as I thought, and always roused him with a question or caress. Then he came out of his meditation, and drank more wine (DC, 214).

One will notice that Wickfield is "gay and cheerful" until he looks upon his daughter, undoubtedly contemplating her future. Yet it is not here that he drinks; it is after he has already been roused out of his melancholy. "Then he came out of his meditation, and drank more wine" intimates a parallel between the idea of addiction and Agnes. Wickfield suffers withdrawal from her tenderness and

conciliation, not the wine. When she is not caressing him or serving him, Wickfield proceeds to become moody and despondent. He has become addicted to relieving his yearnings and emotions through Agnes.

One can also see Wickfield's dependence on his daughter at the dinner scene with Uriah, Mr. Wickfield, and David. Initially, it may appear that Heep is forcing Wickfield to drink and this causes his despondency, but Uriah's salutation to Agnes hints that this is not entirely the case. "Her father had his *empty* [my italics] glass in his hand, I saw him set it down, look at the picture she was so like, put his hand to his forehead, and shrink back" (DC, 532). As the wine is a symbol of Agnes, it is important that the glass is empty here. It is a parallel to the depression over the potential loss of his daughter. Earlier in the novel, in chapter 16, Wickfield again addresses the possibility of losing his daughter, and the wine glass is empty. When Mr. Wickfield demands to know why he must obey Heep, the villain says "Because you have got a daughter" (DC, 533). Wickfield is cognizant of his situation and his own diseased heart. In response to Uriah's comment, he tells David

> Weak indulgence has ruined me. Indulgence in remembrance, and indulgence in forgetfulness. My natural grief for my child's mother turned to disease; my natural love for my child turned to disease . . . I thought it possible that I could truly love one creature in the world, and not love the rest . . . (DC, 534).

Heep claims these utterances are the effect of the wine. However, one can infer from Wickfield's language that he abuses his relationship with Agnes rather than the wine. Just as an addict only desires or cares for one object, Mr. Wickfield only cares for Agnes. Without her, or at the threat of losing her, he becomes literally sick and delirious. Dickens attempts to create a parallel between

the idea of alcoholism and the addictiveness of Agnes. The empty glass represents a potentially departing Agnes; she always keeps his glass full, in reassurance that she is not leaving. The Leavises are correct in observing that Mr. Wickfield is deathly afraid of his daughter leaving him, but the alcohol is merely a symbol of this trepidation.

This may appear a superfluous distinction, that between Agnes as an enabler and the wine as a symbol of Wickfield's addiction to his daughter. However, this is a significant differentiation, because one will discover that Mr. Wickfield does not overcome his addiction like most readers assume he does. Toward the end of the novel, he does stop drinking wine, but there is still something unhealthy in his relationship with his daughter. Aunt Betsey claims that he is a "reclaimed man," no longer "measuring all human interests, and joys, and sorrows, with his one poor little inch-rule" (DC, 769). David even notices that he no longer drinks. In a way though, Mr. Wickfield is even more dependent on Agnes. By the end of the novel, he needs her financially as well as emotionally; she supports him with her teaching. This is another example of the ideal Victorian woman, this time regarding self-employment. Many women in England, who needed to work, became teachers and governesses. Dickens again takes Agnes' depiction to the extreme, as she not only saves her family, but even maintains their large home and comfortable existence.

Wickfield's increased dependence on Agnes is obvious later in the novel when David begs her to "Tell me of yourself. You have hardly ever told me of your own life" (DC, 771). Agnes' reply is eerily congruent with both Wickfield's earlier addiction and the rest of the novel's "silent spots" regarding Dickens' heroine.

> 'What should I tell?' she answered, with her radiant smile. 'Papa is well. You see *us* here, quiet in *our* home; *our* anxieties set at rest, *our* home restored to *us*; [my italics] and

knowing that, dear Trotwood, you know all' (ibid.).

Dickens masks Mr. Wickfield's continued reliance on his daughter by eliminating his alcoholism and presenting what appears to be a resolution to his addiction. Yet, the numerous references to "our" leads one to believe that he is still unable to individuate himself. This masking coincides with the lack of information about Agnes. In a conversation with David, Mr. Wickfield alludes to the fact that Agnes has undergone much hardship and pain, but he stops talking and becomes despondent so one never discovers what exactly this pain is. While Victorian women were not supposed to attract attention, one can see how Agnes' character continues to be the elusive force, or secret, that Miller writes about. Mr. Wickfield tells David and the reader "If I give you any clue to what I am, or to what I have been, you will unravel it, I know. What Agnes is, I need not say" (DC, 773). If everything here is resolved, why is there still so much left unsaid? David tells us that Mr. Wickfield now spends time gardening, which is, if nothing else, a way to keep him away from Agnes and busy while she runs her school. Otherwise, he would only get in the way and hinder her teaching. It becomes apparent that Mr. Wickfield must disappear in order for Agnes to work, or to move on with her life.

One thing few, if any, critics or theorists have ever noticed is that Mr. Wickfield vanishes from the novel for no apparent narrative reason. Dickens never divulges Wickfield's fate and he is never mentioned after explaining his wife's unfortunate death; Agnes' father literally disappears from DC. Mrs. Wickfield's story parallels Wickfield's own; Mrs. Wickfield's father did not want her to marry and disowned her when she did. One cannot help but see the connection with Mr. Wickfield. He is too dependent on Agnes, even after his supposed recovery. This is also analogous to Mr. Peggotty and Emily, David and his mother, and many other familial connections,

not only in this novel, but in all of Victorian literature. The other familial connections also have the idea of separation required to consummate marriage or love. David leaves for two weeks so Clara can get married and Mr. Peggotty is at work all day when Steerforth takes Emily away. However, Dickens does not dismiss Mr. Wickfield in the normal fashion; he simply makes him disappear forever. In "A Last Retrospect," everyone is mentioned (even Steerforth implicitly) but Wickfield. The reader only has one clue as to the fate of Mr. Wickfield. When describing "the by-gone days" and his mistakes, he tells David "I would not cancel it, if it were in my power . . . yet I should cancel with it" (DC 773). Wickfield alludes to the fact that he cannot change who he is, or even his relationship with Agnes. Physical isolation from her (like his garden hobby) is the only solution he knows. Dickens foreshadows this earlier in the novel when Agnes takes a holiday, after Uriah is overthrown. Traddles tells her "'I am happy to say, Miss Wickfield', at once with great delicacy and great earnestness, 'that in your absence Mr. Wickfield has considerably improved'" (DC, 713). Wickfield needs to be separated from Agnes. The alcohol is a symbol of his addiction; when he no longer drinks it is not a sign that the addiction is gone, but that he will disappear like the wine.

Part of the reason Wickfield vanishes is because Agnes fulfills so many different roles for her father; simply correcting one problem (like overprotecting his daughter) will not prevent or correct his diseased love. It is no coincidence that Agnes looks a great deal like Mrs. Wickfield because she also symbolizes Wickfield's wife. There is another parallel here between Mr. Wickfield and the Vicar of Wakefield. In a way, Dickens condenses or funnels all of the Vicar's familial devotion (wife, daughter, etc.) into one person. This funneling is the reason Mr. Wickfield becomes so obsessed and reliant on Agnes; she represents several ideals for him.

Dickens' heroine is, literally and figuratively, his whole family. Wickfield is a martyr to Dickens' commentary on the Victorian family and the fixation on its children. He is also intimating the fact that Agnes is more than a person and she will represent many different and important roles to characters within DC. This is something few critics recognize, yet it is so important to understanding the novel.

Uriah Heep

While Dickens portrays the familial (and in some ways sexual) desires of the family through Wickfield, he depicts raw sexual desire through Uriah. Though many assume that Uriah is merely David's displaced passion, it is not that simple; there is something extremely sexual and perverted in Uriah Heep that is all his own. The villain appears quite humble throughout the novel (though most people realize it is a mask), but regarding Agnes, he is anything but modest. In truth, Agnes has such a powerful effect upon Heep that has trouble suppressing or hiding his sexual emotions. Even before Uriah fully takes control of Mr. Wickfield's company, he feels he deserves Agnes. He tells Wickfield "I've an ambition to make your Agnes, my Agnes, I have as good as right to it (Agnes' hand in marriage) as another man. I have a better right to it than any other man" (DC, 532). It is obvious that Uriah is greatly, and obviously sexually, attracted to Agnes. One can see that he is so covetous of Dickens' heroine that he is willing to make this statement right in front of Mr. Wickfield. Uriah has to realize Wickfield's own feelings toward Agnes, so this is a bold step to take. Earlier in DC, during a walk, Uriah keeps correcting David when he refers to Agnes as "Miss Wickfield." David notes that Uriah keeps correcting him. "'My Agnes!' he exclaimed, with a sickly, angular contortion of himself" (DC, 529). Uriah, who is still attempting to appear humble, cannot help himself. Later in the novel, David tells Heep that he is

constantly plotting against people, to which Uriah responds, "But I've got a motive, as my fellow-partner used to say; and I go at it tooth and nail. I mustn't be put upon, as a numble person, too much. I can't allow people in my way" (DC, 562). Uriah, though he is trying to maintain a mask of humility, is unable to do this when talking about Agnes.

Most readers will probably assume that Uriah's goal in usurping Mr. Wickfield's business is greed. Social theorists, such as Jordan,[20] tend to defend this claim by asserting that Uriah, a lower-class worker, desires upper-class status. However, when one fully examines Uriah's situation, it is apparent that he remains in Canterbury because of Dickens' heroine. It becomes obvious that Wickfield and Heep have the same motive in life. The line "I've an ambition to make your Agnes, my Agnes" is important for this discussion on "diseased love." Their obsession with Dickens' heroine is fundamentally the same. Agnes tells David that Uriah threatens to leave Wickfield's care, but this is a bluff; Heep desires money and power, but the his primary goal is Agnes. Uriah is, in fact, quite intelligent and a hard worker. Remember, even at a young age, he would stay late to learn new legal terms. If his only goal is money, there are easier ways to earn or steal it. Yet, because of Agnes, he will never voluntarily leave Mr. Wickfield's employ. This is ironic because Wickfield gives into his demands of a partnership, even though he has to have some idea of Uriah's feelings for Agnes. Later in the novel, Wickfield comments "I looked for single motives in every one and I was satisfied I had bound him to me by motives of interest. But see what he is- oh, see what he is" (DC, 533). It is apparent here that Wickfield knows that Uriah's motive is the same as his. The real problem for Mr. Wickfield is that Uriah wants to destroy him

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[20] John Jordan, "The Social Subtext of *David Copperfield*," (Dickens Studies Annual 14, 1985), p. 61. Jordan examines the different class structures and different characters' attempts to move up in status (such as David, Uriah, and Micawber).

and claim Agnes, while keeping the business. Heep attempts to do this slowly, by pretending to help Wickfield (and perhaps also to impress Agnes). Yet, there is a notion that he will eventually destroy Mr. Wickfield. Mr. Micawber explains at Uriah's expulsion that Heep had planned to force Wickfield to give up the partnership and his house. In a sense, Uriah wants to become Wickfield, because of Agnes.

One could look at this whole situation with the idea of Uriah apprenticing Wickfield for Agnes. This is, of course, not how the story unfolds, but this is what Heep thinks will happen. Golden[21] and Jordan both discuss the potential biblical references with the names David and Uriah. They observe that these two characters possess the same names from the biblical story in Second Samuel concerning King David and Uriah the Hittite. In this story, King David takes Uriah's wife (Bathsheba) and sends Uriah off to the front lines of battle, in order to get rid of him. This allusion by nomenclature is not a far stretch, considering how clever Dickens can be with his characters' names. Golden goes on to say that Dickens makes a biblical projection here (though Golden does not know if this is conscious or unconscious) regarding David getting Agnes. "David gets the girl, the mark of maturity and social solidarity, not because he has worked for her, as an apprentice (Heep) may be said to have done, but because he's God's choice and ours."[22] Golden raises an interesting notion with his discussion of Uriah's state of mind. Heep feels as if he has earned Agnes by keeping Wickfield out of financial ruin and working under him for so long. Uriah feels he is cheated and one can see how he still thinks Agnes is his and not David's.

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21 Morris Golden, Dickens Imagining Himself, (New York: University Press of America, 1992), p. 104. Golden discusses memory and the flow of time in his chapter on DC. Among these same lines, he deals with several characters' potential interpretations on how the novel unfolds.

22 ibid., p. 104.

A tangent issue to this biblical discussion is that only Uriah sees the significance of this parallel. When he is not successful with Agnes, he adopts the biblical story and blames his failure on Copperfield. Heep views David as a rival for Agnes, even when Copperfield is married to Dora. Uriah tells David, "you have always gone against me" (DC, 572). He also makes similar comments regarding their relationship throughout the novel. "You're quite a dangerous rival . . . you always was, you know" (DC, 529). Part of Heep's downfall is that he does not recognize the fact that David is not a danger to him. This is why Mr. Micawber and Traddles, two ostensibly harmless characters, are able to undermine and overthrow Uriah. Part of the reason Heep is undone is that he does not properly protect himself when David is not in Canterbury; his lack of foresight allows Micawber to trap him. Even after his defeat, Uriah blames Copperfield, though the credit lies entirely with Traddles and Mr. Micawber. Heep's idealization has made him delusional; he is obsessed with Agnes that his enemy is not a law clerk or his own employee, but David - her potential lover. The reader can see how Uriah pathetically believes in the biblical connection with their names because of his obsession with Agnes.

The reason he so vehemently believes that it is David who stops him is because, according to the biblical story, it should be Copperfield overthrowing him. Uriah's own addiction blinds him from seeing the situation clearly. This occurs again when David comes to visit and Uriah implores him to take his old room back, even though Uriah currently lives there (an interesting inversion to the biblical story). In some ways, Heep is trying to fit David into the role of thief, assuming Copperfield will want to take Uriah's room away from him. David and Wickfield, who are not making any biblical connections, do not understand why Uriah persists with offering the room. Heep views Copperfield as the enemy and usurper. This also explains why, whenever David and

Agnes are in the same town, Uriah constantly follows Copperfield. In London, he follows David and Agnes throughout the party, asks to sleep on Copperfield's floor, and in Canterbury he follows David on his walk through the town. Heep, because of Agnes, even begins to obsess over David and he comes to ruin because of this.

The last time David sees Uriah is when Heep is in prison. In a way, this mirrors Mr. Wickfield's separation from Agnes. Uriah claims he is a thoroughly better person, because of his time in solitary confinement. He tells the group touring the prison that "There's a great deal of sin outside . . . There's nothing but sin everywhere - except here" (DC, 785). In his mind, Uriah feels the only safe place for him is in the prison; he recognizes the need to separate himself from Dickens' heroine. Heep feels that Agnes seduces or tempts him, and so she is equally dangerous to Mr. Wickfield and others (hence the line "there's nothing but sin everywhere"). He is clever enough to observe Wickfield's inability to separate himself from his daughter, and he warns David against falling into the same potential disaster.

> I hope you'll curb your passions in the future. I hope Mr. W will repent, and Miss W., and all of that sinful lot. You've been visited with an affliction, and I hope it may do you good; but you'd better have come here. Mr. W had better have come here, and Miss W., too. The best wish I could give you, Mr. Copperfield, and give all you gentleman, is, that you could be took up and brought here. (ibid.)

David views these words as Uriah's attempt at feigned penitence, which it may be. Yet, there is a definite tone of bitterness toward Agnes. She has done nothing wrong; in truth, she cannot, as she is perfect. Still, Heep blames her for his pain and sees isolation from her as a positive thing. Uriah becomes addicted, like Wickfield, and his time in prison is a forced, but necessary

withdrawal.

Agnes' connection to both Mr. Wickfield and Heep is an obvious one; however, few critics realize just how influential and powerful Dickens' heroine is. Their "diseased love" goes beyond mere desire; it becomes an addiction for Wickfield and a source of delusion for Uriah. Dickens presents these two relationships tangent to each other, as the two obsessors fall simultaneously in the narrative. Besides paralleling their fates, Dickens portrays Mr. Wickfield as pathetic and emotionally unstable, while depicting Uriah as a sickly, aesthetically pathetic character. Their own connection serves as a warning to David and the reader that a person cannot grasp onto an ideal, like Agnes, without risking obsession. In the end, this obsession proves so strong, both Wickfield and Heep must disappear and isolate themselves (though not voluntarily) from the source of their base love.

Chapter 2 - Aunt Betsey and Mr. Micawber: Agnes and her Goodness

Just as he recognizes the sexual desires and "diseased love" present in Uriah and Wickfield, David notices the positive effect Agnes has on both Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Micawber. Each character has a personal ideal that she fulfills. It is through her benevolent and angelic qualities that both characters are able to better their lives. While Betsey and Micawber are complicated, by the end of DC, they become simpler and more constant because of the influence of Agnes. In typical Victorian literature, a force of "goodness," like Agnes, is ignored or taken for granted by other characters. Dickens manipulates this norm by subtly crediting Agnes with the powerful effect she has on Betsey and Mr. Micawber; Dickens intimates his heroine's importance through his immense descriptions of the changes in both characters. Dickens also makes Agnes more interesting by hiding her actions; goodness can be boring. Yet, by only subtly associating Agnes with her positive effect on Betsey and Micawber, he can make the effect more intriguing and maintain his heroine's perfection.

Betsey Trotwood

Betsey Trotwood is ostensibly the stereotypical spinster character in Victorian literature. At the same time, however, it is obvious that she wants to be a maternal figure. Before David is born, she comes to Blunderstone Rookery and proclaims "I intend to be her friend. I intend to be her godmother, and I beg you'll call her Betsey Trotwood Copperfield" (DC, 16). Betsey wants to be a guardian, for a goddaughter, and is mortified when Clara's child is a boy. In some ways, Betsey Trotwood is a comic precursor to Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. She comments, in what could easily be Havisham's words, "There must be no mistakes in life with *this* Betsey

Trotwood. There must be no trifling with her affections" (ibid.). Both Betsey and Miss Havisham have suffered because of the cruelty of men. Havisham desires revenge upon the entire male gender, while Betsey's goal appears more familial. She is not the old miserly woman she appears; Betsey wants a daughter.

One notices her maternal instincts from the way she implores Janet, her maidservant, never to marry. In an odd form of substitution, Janet is a quasi-daughter figure for Betsey. When Betsey cannot protect her goddaughter from the trifles of men, she protects her maid. There is an interesting connection between the donkeys that Betsey continually chases off her field (which ironically is not even her personal property) and Janet. Q.D. Leavis claims that her abhorrence of the donkeys and the male drivers results from a psychological animus against the opposite sex.[23] Eigner points out that the diminutive of Janet is Jenny, which signifies a female donkey.[24] While these observations can foster a variety of different perceptions regarding Betsey, it is obvious that she sees herself as a maternal figure for Janet. This point is furthered by the field from which she chases away these animals. Betsey does not own this field, just as she is not really Janet's mother, or even her guardian.

As the novel progresses, it becomes obvious that Betsey still considers herself guardian to her goddaughter Betsey Trotwood, even though this person is imaginary. Throughout the novel, David explains that his aunt constantly refers to this imaginary creature as if she were real. The fictitious Betsey Trotwood is not only extant for Betsey, but perfect as well. For a great deal of the

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23 Q.D. and F.R. Leavis, p. 64.

24 Edwin Eigner, "*David Copperfield* and the Benevolent Spirit," (Dickens Studies Annual 14, 1972), p. 15.

novel, whenever David missteps or makes a mistake, Betsey points out that her goddaughter would never have committed such an error. David comments that, after his aunt takes kindly to him, she "even encouraged me to hope that if I went on as I had begun, I might take equal rank in her affections with my sister Betsey Trotwood" (DC, 208). In extremely surreal fashion, Aunt Betsey creates her own ideal female, through this imaginary goddaughter that is never born. It becomes such a powerful force in Betsey's life that, as David notes, no one can compare.

To my knowledge, no critic has ever asserted this point, but Agnes is Betsey Trotwood, the imaginary goddaughter, for all intents and purposes. Her perfection extends even to Aunt Betsey. When Betsey must live with David in London, they return to his flat to find everything cleaned and carefully arranged to imitate Betsey's cottage home in Dover. Copperfield comments "I knew who had done all this, by its seeming to have quietly done itself . . . even if I supposed Agnes to be miles away" (DC, 475). This is something the perfect Betsey Trotwood would do for her godmother. Aunt Betsey is aware of this connection, which is why she wishes Agnes and David to marry. David, and the reader, are first made aware of Betsey's affinity for Agnes by Uriah Heep. "She has a great admiration for Miss Agnes, I believe" (DC, 224). It is important to note that Betsey never explicitly declares her affections for Agnes, but they are nonetheless obvious. This is another example of one of Miller's "known secrets." Dickens underplays this relationship, as he does most of the ties to Agnes; too much text would destroy the ideal Agnes or the ideal goddaughter.

One can see that Betsey feels this connection with Agnes when she lies to David and everyone else about how she loses her estate. She thinks that Mr. Wickfield has misused her money, but she lies to protect his good name, telling him it is "for the sake of his daughter."

Remarkably, Betsey does this even though being false is one of her three deplorable vices (DC, 214). She protects Dickens' heroine from harm, just as she said she would always protect the mythical Betsey Trotwood. Agnes' effect on Betsey becomes apparent again, during the last few chapters of the novel. David's aunt twice lies to him about the status of Agnes' love life, in the hopes that she can push him to marry Agnes. She commits this "pious fraud" in order to motivate David to explore his own emotions. After David tells her that he is going to marry Agnes, the usually stoic Betsey becomes quite emotional.

> My aunt, with one clap of her hands, and one look through her spectacles, immediately went into hysterics, for the first and only time in all my knowledge of her. The hysterics called up Peggotty. The moment my aunt was restored, she flew at Peggotty, and calling her a silly old creature, hugged her with all her might (DC, 794).

Betsey even hugs Peggotty, whom she still considers a wicked creature, simply because of her name. This is quite a powerful scene, considering Betsey is such a stoic character; earlier in the novel David defies the science of physiognomy to determine Betsey's emotion without her consent. Only one person could elicit such a response from Betsey Trotwood and that is the angelic Betsey Trotwood - Agnes.

Needham notices that Betsey is the first who succeeds in opening her own heart, which has been shut from her bad marriage.[25] One could argue that this is because of David, but a better explanation would be found with Agnes. She is the only character who can fulfill the ideal that Betsey creates in the place of her goddaughter. Agnes also reverses Betsey's original

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25 Gwendolyn Needham quoted from Edwin Eigner, "*David Copperfield* and the Benevolent Spirit" (Dickens Studies Annual 14, 1972), p. 1.

disappointment, by creating an actual Betsey Trotwood. Here, Aunt Betsey becomes a real godmother, and as David notes, constantly spoils her goddaughter. This allows Betsey to move partially on with her life. She now cares for a young child (her true desire in the novel), and while she still chases the donkeys, Janet has married. David's good angel is also his imaginary, perfect sister, Betsey Trotwood.

Mr. Micawber

David's aunt is not the only character in DC that is missing something in his or her life; Mr. Micawber also lacks a familial figure. While there have been many claims that Micawber is a caricature of Dickens' own father, few people have realized that this poor man is missing a parental figure within his own life. There is an innate selfishness to Mr. Micawber and it directly relates to the fact that he has no one in the novel, or his life, to which he must answer. Perhaps a better way of stating this situation is to say that Micawber refuses to answer to anyone regarding his actions. It becomes so commonplace in the novel that one starts to overlook the significance of the fact that Micawber never pays any of his debts. He constantly borrows from friends and strangers until his sudden conversion into a reputable man. Micawber also does not answer to anyone emotionally. Mrs. Micawber would normally fulfill this role, but she says little other than her faithful sentiment that she will never leave her husband, regardless of their situation. Even during Micawber's period of immorality with Heep, his wife can do little more than write David for help. She cannot address her husband on this issue, or any other even remotely significant matter.

Micawber is, in truth, the perfect person to descend into immorality with Uriah Heep. He is desperate for money and independent of responsibility. As the novel progresses, guilt develops within Mr. Micawber and he reverses his own degrading behavior. Yet, where does this regret

originate? Micawber has never taken responsibility for his own actions. There is no one to make him feel remorseful; his wife will never leave him, and his children are financially and economically bound to him. Few people realize that Micawber's guilt is both unrealistic and uncharacteristic of his nature. In her letter to David, Mrs. Micawber writes "Mr. Micawber is morose. He is severe . . . He looks with an eye of coldness even on the unoffending stranger who last became a member of our circle" (DC, 576). Later, David describes him as unable to speak properly (Ch. 49), which is also atypical of Micawber. Before, whenever he feels uncomfortable or depressed, Mr. Micawber either whistles or makes punch; now he can do neither. It becomes readily apparent that he changes his nature. The easiest explanation for this is that Micawber becomes enraged with his involvement in Heep's schemes. Yet this should not satisfy anyone, because there is still no source of guilt. It cannot come from his own morals regarding money, these have already been demonstrated. His wife and children are not responsible either. Perhaps, David could be the cause (he is the only person Micawber refuses to ask for money), but Copperfield is in London, not Canterbury. There can be only one person who could illicit such a response: Agnes.

She is, in truth, the only logical explanation for Micawber's guilt. Dickens even brings this out subtly in the text. When David asks Mr. Micawber about Agnes, his response is strange:

> 'Miss Wickfield,' said Mr. Micawber, *now turning bright red*, 'is, as she always is, a pattern, and a bright example. My dear Copperfield, she is the only starry spot in a miserable existence. My respect for that young lady, my admiration or her character, my devotion to her for her love and truth, and goodness! . . .' (DC, 651).

It is obvious that his guilt results from his interactions with Agnes. This reaction is, again,

uncustomary for someone who feels so little remorse concerning his ill behavior and always returns to a jocund manner. Yet when his spirits should return, he merely comments "My homage to Miss Wickfield, is a flight of arrows in my bosom" (ibid.). Dickens is clever to further Micawber's new pain, by having David comment that Micawber attempts to whistle but cannot, and later is unable to make his punch. The procedure of cutting and squeezing lemons always makes him happy and he is punctilious and dexterous in every detail; but here he is "putting the lemon-peel into the kettle, the sugar into the snuff tray, and confidently attempted to pour boiling water out of a candlestick" (DC, 654). One could make a very strong claim that this is the first time Mr. Micawber feels lasting guilt. No one else could create such a change in Micawber except Agnes.

Some may be skeptical to accept such a trite interpretation of this maturing by Micawber (no critic has ever taken this view), but there is really little alternative. He is estranged from his wife and family at this point in the novel and his previous selfishness intimates that he cannot come to this moral transformation autonomously. Micawber feels guilty because Agnes is watching him, or he thinks she is watching him, as he commits crimes for Heep. Remember, Dickens' heroine would constantly be around the office with her father and running into Micawber. Late in the novel, he expresses this sentiment when explaining his sudden change. Micawber tells David, and the others, he was "Stimulated by the silent monitor within, and by a no less touching and appealing monitor without - to whom I will briefly refer as Miss W." (DC, 691). Micawber goes on to explain that he started watching and recording Heep's actions surreptitiously. He feels remorse because, for the first time in his life, he will have to answer to someone: Agnes. She has been watching him, as the word "monitor" suggests and he changes because of this. The "silent

monitor within" is turned on by Agnes, and Mr. Micawber feels he must finally be accountable for his actions. The only way he can do this is to catch Uriah and undo all his misdeeds.

Similarly to Aunt Betsey's change, this transformation is for the better. Micawber overthrows Heep, returns everyone's property, and goes on to repay his debts, while also becoming prosperous. Dickens misleads the reader by making Micawber appear to be the hero, but it is obvious why Micawber changes. Traddles comments that "we ought to consider that Mr. Micawber did right for right's sake, when we reflect what terms he might have made with Uriah Heep himself, for his silence" (DC, 716). Yet, one realizes that without Agnes he would never have had the inclination to go after Uriah. Dickens' heroine changes him, by making him accountable for his actions, and he becomes a better person because of this. In a significant and important reversal, Mr. Micawber becomes responsible.

Traddles comments that Micawber is good with finances, when it is not his own money. However, this is nothing more than an ironic and satiric statement. Mr. Micawber has been misusing and squandering other people's money for his entire life. This is a large part of his selfishness and unaccountability. When Traddles makes this statement, it is a clandestine hint to the reader that Micawber has significantly changed. This transformation becomes complete when David gets word that Mr. Micawber is a magistrate in Australia. Here, one can see a complete reversal; Micawber is now responsible for everyone else's well being and the community's finances as well. It is his job to protect people's money and cultivate their resources, instead of merely borrowing it and never being accountable for his spending. Agnes indirectly changes Micawber from an irresponsible squanderer to a responsible official.

Just as Agnes opens Betsey's heart, by fulfilling the role of daughter, one could make a

similar claim with her relationship to Micawber. One aspect of Mr. Micawber's life that has not been addressed regards his parents; they are conspicuously absent from the text. This is not uncommon for Victorian literature; in fact, it is quite commonplace and perhaps even superfluous information, considering his age. Yet there are constant references to Mrs. Micawber's family. Her parents and siblings are consistently mentioned, although they are never brought into the novel. It is also suspicious, considering the Micawbers are always in financial crisis and ask everyone they know to loan them money. Why are his parents never considered, or even mentioned, when the Micawbers are thinking who might give them aid? This is another example of how Micawber has no ties in his life that hold him accountable. Perhaps one could make the assertion that Agnes fulfills the role of a maternal figure here. Kincaid claims that the comic figures of the novel, including Micawber, are exported to Australia because David must discipline his heart.[26] Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that it is Mr. Micawber who leaves this comic, childish world behind for one of responsibility. Micawber, who often acts like a child (in his selfishness, irresponsibility, and naivety), finally learns something from Agnes. It is because of her that he finally matures.

Both Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Micawber benefit from Agnes' presence and both characters seem to idealize her in similar ways. Betsey sees Agnes as a potential daughter and Micawber views her as the one person to whom he must answer, or be accountable to for his actions. Part of this is a result of each character's own dilemma, but a large part also deals with the inherent "goodness" within Agnes. She has a significant impact on both these characters and for many readers this may go unnoticed. Just like the situation with Wickfield and Uriah, Agnes'

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[26] James Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1971), p. 163.

presence here and her importance is often clandestine and subversive. Part of Dickens' reasoning for this is undoubtedly because anything overt would attract too much attention from the reader and off of David; many critics complain that this already occurs. Yet, these characters are not to be the focus of the novel, they merely show the influence and power of their common angel.

Chapter 3 - Dora and Steerforth: Agnes as an Anti-Foil and Symbol of Death

Dora and Steerforth's relationships with Agnes are interesting because they are also idealized by David. Many critics claim that Dickens uses Agnes as a foil, regarding these two characters. A foil, in the material sense, makes the original object brighter, or in the psychological sense, makes the original person appear more interesting. Many assert that Agnes is the dry unattractive background that allows the personalities of Dora and Steerforth to prosper.[27] Part of the reason Dickens' heroine appears like a consolation to the Victorian ideal is because she is perceived as the backdrop or contrasting surface that augments the attractiveness and romance within both Dora and Steerforth. Yet one must remember that these two characters are both fallen ideals. Agnes is left unexamined, remaining perfect for David, something Dora and Steerforth do not do. Throughout the novel, these two are consciously and subconsciously being compared to Dickens' heroine and are the worse from this contrast. A more appropriate label to place on Agnes here is that of an anti-foil, she makes the other two appear worse, rather than better. She is not just another ideal, she is *the* ideal and when contrasted (or perhaps competing would be more appropriate) she will invariably flourish. This contrast also allows Dickens to further Agnes' perfection, in a manner that still leaves her unexamined. In truth, he cannot examine his heroine or Agnes will inevitably fall, so he uses Dora and Steerforth as foils to further her idealization.

There is also a second aspect to these relationships. As Dora and Steerforth come into

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27 Graham Storey, Interweaving Truth and Fiction (Macmillan Press: London, 1979), p. 99. Storey, among others, talks about how Agnes is not allowed to become comic like other characters and leaves the reader disappointed.

conflict or competition with Agnes, they invariably lose. Welsh[28] and J. Hillis Miller[29] claim that Agnes is the Angel of Death in DC. While I do not believe this is true (to the extent they both claim it to be), I do think that Dickens' heroine does represent death for Dora and Steerforth. She will not only conquer David's other ideals, but like Wickfield and Heep, these two characters must disappear from the novel and David's mind. In a sense, Agnes destroys them; Dora and Steerforth are martyrs because of their connection to Dickens' heroine. They do not idealize her as much as other characters in DC, but their relationship with her is still important because it is a fatal one.

Dora

Dora Spenlow Copperfield is one of the most loveable and unfortunate characters in Victorian literature. She is an upper-class child who is forced to live in poverty when she has not been trained to run a household. Darby comments that contemporary readers would recognize the problems many women of her upbringing would have with the domestic responsibilities bestowed upon Dora.[30] Yet, one cannot help but compare her to Agnes. This is obviously intended by Dickens, because he makes David poor directly before they marry. If Copperfield remains well off, Dora's shortcomings as a housewife would not be as obvious. It is also evident that this comparison is intended because Agnes appears much more regularly here than earlier in the novel, during David's courting days. Her presence makes Dora seem even worse than just the description of her bad housekeeping.

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28 Alexander Welsh, The City of Dickens (Calrendon Press: Oxford, 1971), p. 180-95. Welsh correctly observes that Agnes is present for a number of the characters' deaths and claims the several apostrophes that end the novel are more or less prayers to Dickens' heroine.

29 J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens. The World of His Novels (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1958), p. 157. Miller sees Agnes in terms of a more general religious belief, but still related with death.

30 Margaret Darby, "Dora and Doady" (*Dickens Studies Annual* 22, 1993), p. 164.

The physical staging of Dora and Agnes' relationship is best represented in the marriage scene and corresponding illustration. This is an interesting and even demented situation, where Dora holds Agnes' hand throughout the ceremony. In the picture, Dickens' heroine stands next to Dora, and somewhat behind her (surrounding her smaller frame). It is hard to know how to interpret such an illustration, but continuing with the notion of Agnes as an anti-foil, it is apparent that Dora cannot let go of Agnes; she must remain connected to Dickens' heroine for the inverted foil to continue. One could see this simply as Agnes providing support and care for Dora on the day of the wedding, but there is something twisted in the fact that Dora holds her hand during the ceremony. The best explanation is that this is a physical staging of what will occur throughout the rest of David and Dora's marriage; Agnes will always be there, overshadowing her counterpart. Jackson provides an interesting addition to this examination, with her observation regarding the illustration of the wedding. They are in a church that is literally three times the size of any character and appears grandiose and highly ornamented. Remember, it is Agnes, not Dora, that David connects with a church.[31] Not only is the physical Agnes present, but her larger and more intimidating representation surrounds Dora. As the church is bigger than all the characters at the ceremony, one can see how Dora, or any other person for that matter, cannot compare to Agnes.

David's description of their domestic troubles in "Our Housekeeping", and later in "Domestic", directly follows the marriage. The chapter is not only full of many episodes of ineptitude on Dora's (and David's) part, but a suspicious amount of references to Agnes. One cannot help but remember how effortlessly Agnes rearranges David's flat to accommodate Betsey. There are not only many allusions to Dickens' heroine, but many of them come from Dora herself.

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[31] Jackson, p. 62-3.

Some critics view this as an insult to Dora, saying she would never consciously feel that David should have married Agnes. Instead, Dickens probably has her make statements regarding his angel because it would better contrast the two women. These references begin when Dora tells David she wishes she could have stayed with Agnes earlier. "I think she might have improved me, and I think I might have learnt from her" (DC, 594). David tries to deny this by noting that "Agnes has had her father to take care of for these many years" (ibid.). However, Dora has had her father to take care of too; this is another example of an ironic statement, like Betsey's comment regarding Mr. Wickfields' transformation, that readers should question.

Later, Dora even asks David what he would have done if he had never met her, "Suppose you had never seen me at all?" (DC, 565). Copperfield pretends not to understand the question, answering "Suppose we had never been born" (ibid.). Eventually, though, David cannot help but start to acknowledge this query. One recognizes this early, with Copperfield's comparison of the two women's keys. Dora never uses hers and they soon become a plaything for Jip. Dickens often uses keys as a sign of domestic abilities in other novels, like *Bleak House*. Dora's disregard for the keys would be enough to portray her weakness, in and of itself. Yet Dickens does something different here; instead, he makes a contrast to Agnes' keys. One might not make the connection, except that David asks Agnes about her keys once, directly before meeting with Dora. He is walking with Agnes and asks her if she still carries her keys with her (which of course she does). This questioning of his marriage soon becomes apparent, even overt, later when David tries to deal with this dilemma.

> What I missed, I still regarded - I always regarded - as something that had been a dream of my youthful fancy [Agnes]; 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 . . . I thought of the better state preceding manhood that I had outgrown; and then the contented days with Agnes arose before me . . . (DC, 642).

It is unfair for David to compare his life with Dora to his life with Agnes as a child. Copperfield is also responsible for many of the couple's domestic shortcomings. Darby complains that this comparison is wrong on David's part. However, there are so many connections and parallels between the two women that Copperfield, as well as the reader, cannot help but comply.

David admits that he thinks about what would happen if he did not marry Dora, but he goes on to say that "she was so incorporated with my existence, that it was the idlest of all fancies" (DC, 642). There is little doubt that David actually loves Dora, but this creates a problem for the narrative and Dickens; she must die. It is not simply for the narrative either, but a symbolic outcome of Dora confronting the all-powerful ideal of Agnes. Even though she cannot know her fate, it is fitting that Dora is so afraid of Dickens' heroine when she first meets her. In Dickens' autobiography, Forster tells of the writer sending a letter, explaining that he was having trouble deciding what to do with Dora.[32] One can see that even within Dickens, there is a sincere regret regarding her fate; she must become a martyr for the novel. Dora's death scene reaffirms this fact. It is no coincidence that Agnes is present; in fact, the scene occurs with just the three characters. At the end, in what becomes symbolic of this triangular relationship, Dora wishes to talk to Agnes alone. There is a great deal of mental imagery, as the two women are above David, in what could

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[32] John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, Ed. J.W.T. Ley. (Cecil Palmer: London, 1928), p. 536.

be his figurative head (the upstairs representing his memory) and only Agnes returns from the encounter. Her presence even causes Jip, the last remnant of Dora, to die. David comments that, while he waits for Agnes "I think of every little trifle between me and Dora" (DC, 706). Within several paragraphs, he also notes that "the spirit of Agnes so pervaded all we thought, and said, and did, in that time of sorrow . . . but her influence was so quiet that I know no more" (DC, 708). Dora's idealization has been killed (along with her character physically), while Agnes' unexamined perfection remains, all the stronger from Dora's presence in the novel.

Steerforth

A similar relationship develops between Agnes and Steerforth, but this one has even larger implications than the pairing of Dora and Agnes. Steerforth is present throughout most of the novel and is a powerful force in David's life. As the story progresses, and his friend loses his perfection, one can see how Copperfield still clings to the ideal of Steerforth. David blinds himself from his friend's transgressions and sins, causing much pain for the Peggottys and other people in DC. It is only through Agnes that David is able to recognize that Steerforth is a negative influence. Dickens is clever in portraying the theater scene, where Agnes and Steerforth meet; David is dissipated. This is the only time in the novel when the two characters physically meet and it is fitting that Copperfield's mind is clouded and thus he cannot remember a great deal from the evening. David's drunken state is symbolic of the mental dilemma going on within his memory, concerning these two powerful forces. They are so much a part of David that they cannot meet any other way; the two cannot even address each other. Agnes tells Copperfield to "ask your friends to take you home" (DC, 339), yet Steerforth and the others are standing next to David. It becomes obvious that there is a powerful battle going on within Dickens' narrator and the meeting of these

two influences is as much a cause of David's drunkenness as is the alcohol.

Agnes' function as an anti-foil to Steerforth is much more overt than with Dora. She explicitly warns David that his friend is a bad influence upon him. She calls Steerforth a "bad angel", to which Copperfield replies "you are my good angel" (DC, 342). Here, again, one can see how as Agnes serves as an anti-foil, Dickens furthers her own perfection. Not only are both idealizations powerful within David, but they become polarities in his mind. This dichotomy continues throughout the novel, even though the two never actually meet. Stone discusses the connection between Agnes and Steerforth in great detail. He sees a parallel between the two, regarding David's soul. "By touching Agnes with the supernal and Steerforth with infernal powers, Dickens universalizes the contest within David and makes it cosmic."[33] Stone explains that the drunken scene is a "microcosm of a larger drama" (ibid.), one for control of David. Early in the novel, Steerforth is seen merely as a suspicious character; it is not until Agnes' observation that David begins describing his friend's transgressions. Dickens emphasizes this point by devoting an entire chapter, "Good and Bad Angels", to this relationship. Agnes, of course, has slightly more control, as David comments, "I suspect the truth to be, that the influence of Agnes was upon me, undisturbed by the sight of him [Steerforth], and that it was the more powerful with me, because she had so large a share in my thoughts and interests" (DC, 358). While Agnes' contrast with Dora is more external and physically portrayed, Dickens depicts this particular conflict within David's mind.

This relationship, between Steerforth and Agnes, becomes a threat to David working out his anxieties regarding his "good angel." His scoundrel friend controls a significant portion of his

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[33] Harry Stone, Dickens and the Invisible World, (MacMillan Press: London, 1979), p. 232.

mind; this is obvious after Steerforth has stolen Emily and David is going to visit Agnes. He explains, "Of Steerforth, I told her nothing" (DC, 453). It is obvious that Copperfield cannot work out his emotions and memories because of his "bad angel." Steerforth is an obstacle in David's personal quest to examine his life; Dickens alludes to this by the fact that Steerforth is one of the only characters who is portrayed so poorly and incorrectly by David. Even at the end of the novel, Copperfield cannot completely come to terms with Steerforth's base actions. This idea of unresolved memory resides in David's recollections of Salem House. Copperfield recites the stories from his favorite books to Steerforth each night.

> What ravages I committed on my favorite authors in the course of my interpretation of them, I am not in a condition to say, and should be very unwilling to know; but I had a profound faith in them, and I had, to the best of my belief, a simple, earnest manner of narrating what I did narrate; and these qualities went a long way (DC, 94).

This is perhaps the one passage that best describes and symbolizes DC. The first half of the quotation is Steerforth's influence: a bad perception, ignorance, and an unwillingness to know (everything critics disparage David for as a narrator). It is important to remember that these are stories David constantly reads at Blunderstone Rookery; he should know them quite well. Instead, they are destroyed, and the reason is Steerforth. He symbolizes a misinterpretating or misremembering force within David. The second portion of the above passage could be ascribed to Agnes. For David, she represents the true understanding of himself. He has faith in Agnes' own clarity; recall the last three paragraphs of the novel, where Copperfield describes her as a clear light whom he sees everything and everyone through. Agnes represents a confidence and lucidity that David desires in his life, while Steerforth symbolizes the clouded and misguided Copperfield

who cannot find himself.

This battle for David's memory is played out in the chapter entitled "The Tempest." In a letter, Dickens called this section, "the most powerful effect in all the Story."[34] The storm is an extension of the conflict between Agnes and Steerforth. David tells the reader that he has seen the Yartmouth storm growing larger throughout the book, "throwing its fore-cast shadow even on the incidents of my childish days" (DC, 721). The storm is a more physical description of the theater scene and Agnes' talk with David on "Angels." Dickens keeps the true contest subversive, but David makes enough references to his mind that one recognizes the powerful struggle between Steerforth and Agnes. "Something within me, faintly answering the storm without, tossed up the depths of my memory, and made a tumult in them" (DC, 724). Stone and others consider this a point of self discovery, or at least an origin for whatever David finds with his time in Switzerland. This is the central point of the novel geographically and symbolically, as the shore where the shipwreck takes place is the same shore where David plays with Emily when they are children. David comments that "I had lost clear arrangement of time and distance" (DC, 725). Copperfield's mind is starting to address all his memories and, perhaps, even his feelings for Agnes. If he is to find clarity, Steerforth, like Dora, must die. It is important to notice the violence with which the storm destroys David's friend. Steerforth is a stronger adversary to Agnes and he is punished because of this. While Dora's death is peaceful, Steerforth's is torturous.

One can see this mental victory, in the fact that David cannot mention Steerforth's name for the rest of the novel (except one apostrophe). Ironically, perhaps in a fitting exchange, David constantly says Agnes' name, either in direct address or apostrophe. It is also worth noting that

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[34] Stone, p. 256.

David's description of Steerforth references Salem House. "I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school" (DC, 731). This is a reference to David's misreadings and misinterpretations. It is obvious that Agnes and Steerforth have a violent and powerful relationship, even though they never meet in the text. They are polar forces, who are dangerous to each other, and to David as well. Ham is also a martyr to David's memory, as he dies in this scene too. Many critics notice that the sea is a symbol of Copperfield's mind and memory. It is no coincidence that he is a ship-builder and a sailor. Ham's numerous attempts to plunge into the sea leave him beaten and hurt; this is symbolic of the fact that Agnes completely pervades David's mind. Anyone who attempts to enter (like Ham) or remain (like Dora and Steerforth) will be destroyed.

Chapter 4 - David and Agnes

There are other examples of characters' profound relationships with Agnes. One could explore Dickens' heroine representing Traddle's fiancee Sophie or the pristine Emily for Mr. Peggotty. However, it would be more beneficial to examine what all of Agnes' relationships and idealizations mean to David. Someone reading this thesis may still wonder why I waited so long to discuss David and his beloved. Partially, I wanted to establish just how powerful and pervasive Agnes is in DC. But I was also mirroring the novel itself; we do not fully discover David's true feelings for his beloved until the last fifty pages of this eight hundred page work. In these last section, we begin to realize how everything previous to this part of the novel relates to the all-important relationship of David and Agnes. As I have asserted, DC is a novel about a young man coming to terms with his own idealization of his beloved. Jackson talks a great deal about how David represents his idealization throughout the novel.

> I contend that David's memory process, furthermore, must remain central to any reading of the novel's settings, characters, image patterns, or issues. An understanding of Agnes' connection to the images conjured up by David's memory, however much he recognizes those images and their associations, provides special insight into Agnes' role and significance.[35]

Many assert that the characters Uriah and Steerforth are representative of David's sexual and emotional drives. In fact, the Penguin edition even mentions this supposed fact, on the back of its cover. Yet, one must remember that David does this with all the minor characters in DC, not just

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[35] Jackson, p. 55.

Uriah and Steerforth. This is an important distinction because this is not Dickens or David displacing emotion in typical Victorian fashion, but Copperfield attempting to negotiate his own idealization. Instead of just supplanting his emotions on a couple of people, he narratively separates these passions into many different characters, images, and themes.

I have dealt specifically with Agnes and the different characters in the novel, asserting that David recognizes such relationships (for Agnes goodness is somewhat real) and exaggerates them while writing DC because of his own idealization. This is realistic behavior on Copperfield's part, as people who are in love or smitten often create an image of perfection for their beloved. Jackson comments on this as well.

> In a larger sense, too, we understand Agnes as a prime example of the Victorian male's tendency to idealize women--at least, the woman who will share his hearth. Throughout our assessment of Agnes, we must remember the needs, blindness, and sufferings of the narrator protagonist. If she is an ideal, it is because he has made her so.[36]

The problem with an ideal is that it must be negotiated or it will fall. The true purpose of DC, for David, in remembering the past, is to address the ideal of Agnes that exists within him. He attempts this by writing his personal history. In a sense, he is inverting Mr. Wickfield's idealization; just as Agnes represents the Vicar's entire family, she represents something similar for Copperfield. Agnes fills many roles for David, which he separates and describes through other characters within the novel. In a way, the funneling of Agnes into Wickfield is reversed for David by writing DC. He must examine the sexuality and obsession of Heep and Wickfield, the goodness of Dickens' heroine regarding Betsey and Micawber, and then try to prevent the fall of

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[36] ibid., p. 64.

Agnes, like his previous ideals, Steerforth and Dora. In truth, DC is really about the ten years of marriage to Agnes that is left out of the novel. This is where David comes to terms with his love for Agnes and writes DC.

Modern theory allows one to begin analyzing DC by noticing different themes, such as an Oedipal complex, class conflict, or female idealization. However, in order to examine fully what David is doing in this novel, we must look at DC holistically. While feminism, psychoanalysis, social theory, and other modern criticism all provide an attractive approach to reading DC, they will not enlighten a reader in regard to the larger issue of why David presents the novel the way he does. Many critics fall into this trap of segment or small issue reading, meaning one can really only use their work for reference. An article on David's oedipal complex is interesting and even helpful, but it does little for the novel as a whole; DC is too complicated a work to be explained so easily. I focus on Miller and Jackson, because they attempt to look at the novel and its issues as a whole.

Another critic, John Kucich, also presents a potentially useful approach. He talks about the repression, passion, and severe doubling within the novel. Kucich correctly observes that David is the only one who synthesizes the other characters' experiences.[37] He is incorrect in his analysis that there is doubleness and complexity in the minor characters, but he is correct in his assessment that David has complex feelings for Agnes. "David's attitude toward Agnes remains complexly multiple, rather than simply oppositional, and he spends a good part of the end of the novel articulating what he calls the 'shifting quickness of my mind.'"[38] The minor characters are simple,

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37 John Kucich, "Self-Conflict in *David Copperfield*" (*David Copperfield* and *Hard Times*. MacMillan Press: London, 1995), p. 150.
38 Kucich, p. 145.

because they represent one of the many emotions David feels for Agnes. Hence, Mr. Wickfield's one motive in life, Betsey's constant references to her imaginary goddaughter, and Uriah's sexual obsession with Agnes. Betsey intimates this to the reader when Wickfield tells her that he has only one motive in life. "You claim to have one plain motive in all you do yourself. You don't suppose, I hope, that you are the only plain dealer in this world?" (DC, 211). This reinforces the notion that David's friends and family are one-dimensional, or can be, on certain subjects (like Agnes). Copperfield recognizes Wickfield's love for his daughter, Uriah's obsession, and other such behavior. David then exaggerates it in order to deal better with his corresponding emotion. Consequently, a parallel develops and the narrative resolution will coincide with the ostensible psychological resolution within Copperfield.

Wickfield disappears because he is driven from David's mind. He is actually "canceled with it [memories of Mr. Wickfield's past transgressions]," to use his own words. Wickfield represents the diseased, obsessed love that David is trying to avoid. Copperfield obsesses over Dora and both suffer because of it (I will go into more detail with this later). By having Wickfield simply disappear, it is almost as if David is claiming that he has overcome his own diseased love or that this diseased love with Agnes is nonexistent. It is no coincidence that Mr. Wickfield disappears in the chapter entitled "Agnes" and the next chapter involves the supposedly reformed Uriah Heep.

Heep's supposed reform is intricately connected with David's as well. When Copperfield visits the prison, Uriah warns him, "You have been visited with an affliction, and I hope it may do you good; but you'd better have come here" (DC, 785). David tries to ignore everything Uriah says, claiming it is simply Heep's continued attempt to appear humble. Yet he cannot help but take

heed of Uriah's warning. Copperfield realizes that Agnes has not had a positive effect on Mr. Wickfield or Heep. They become so obsessed that they can think of nothing else; she becomes their one motive in life. This does not bode well for David, who desires the object of their affections. It has to frighten Copperfield that the only two people who view Agnes sexually become weakened to the point of destruction. Heep's comment regarding David's "affliction" contains what could almost be a kind-hearted statement - "I hope it may do you good." Copperfield recognizes the possibility that Agnes and an attraction to her can produce a positive result. Though he is not in prison, like the other two penitents, David feels he must reform as well. Bandelin introduces the idea that Copperfield is a third penitent, and the only successful reformer of the three; it is directly after his visit to the prison that David comes to terms with his love for Agnes.[39] Yet, it may not be this simple.

Copperfield notes that Uriah and his fellow inmate, Littimer, are anything but reformed. There is also something more going on in this chapter regarding the penitents and David.

> Twenty seven and Twenty eight were perfectly consistent and unchanged; that exactly what they were then, they had always been; that the hypocritical knaves were just the subjects to make that sort of profession in such a place; that they knew its market-value at least as well as we did, in the immediate service it would do them when they were expatriated; in a word, that it was a *rotten, hollow, painfully- suggestive piece of business altogether* (DC, 786-7).

Just as David wants to think he has overcome his diseased love by banishing Wickfield from his

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39 Carl Bandelin, "David Copperfield: A Third Interesting Penitent," Ed. Harold Bloom, (Modern Critical Interpretations of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* . Chelsea House Publishers: New York, 1987), p. 29.

mind, he wants to feel that he, unlike Uriah, has reformed his ways (perhaps even asserting that only a true reformer could recognize a fraud). Yet, I cannot help but think this may be a trap. David wants to believe he has reformed, but this may be an illusion too. First of all, the fact that Littimer is present is suspicious on Dickens' part. One should note that the name "Littimer" is another word for seashore. As the sea represents David's mind, this "landed emotion" of David's, like Littimer's reformation, may be a false one. In some ways, there may still only be two penitents: Uriah and David, with Littimer symbolizing a resolution within Copperfield's memory.

David's language is also suspect. The line "rotten, hollow, painfully-suggestive piece of business" seems out of context. What is this scene suggesting? One likely possibility is that, just as Mr. Wickfield does not actually disappear (something has to happen to him), David may not be totally over his own impure and diseased love for Agnes. Copperfield has a strong desire for this to be so and his representation of Wickfield and Heep portrays this yearning. His time in Switzerland is supposed to be like Mr. Wickfield's gardening or Heep's isolation. Yet, just as Wickfield and Heep are still "diseased," David still idealizes Agnes. Critics often complain that the ending to DC is unbelievable and unsatisfactory. Part of this may be due to the fact that David is not completely reformed; in his defense, he never actually claims it to be. Copperfield often refers to his "undisciplined heart", but never claims to have successfully disciplined himself. His writing may simply be a method of coping with his idolatry, not necessarily a cure for it.

The parallels to resolution David creates among himself, Aunt Betsey, and Mr. Micawber are equally as tenuous as those he asserts regarding his "diseased love." While Copperfield may not be completely reformed in his devotion to Agnes, there is a need for him to support Betsey and Micawber's ideals of Agnes with reality; he needs her goodness to be real. If Betsey and

Micawber's perceptions of Dickens' heroine are true, David can justify his own feelings for Agnes without really providing any justification at all. Copperfield's need for Agnes' perfection to be real is Dickens' true reason for providing such a ubiquitously happy ending to the novel, something he never did before or after DC. Chesterton, among others, specifically complains of the Imperialistic ending and what he calls a "middle-class compromise disguised as a second marriage."[40] Many critics, and readers alike, have remained skeptical regarding these two narrative resolutions. Dickens sends half the characters of DC to Australia, where they find success and resolve all their problems. Yet he must create such an optimistic ending to the novel. If Agnes' positive and angelic effect on people is real (which will mean David's love is real), there must be a happy ending to the novel. Betsey and Micawber are both unreliable sources and David knows this. Betsey believes in an imaginary goddaughter and Micawber gives wanton speeches as if he is a member of Parliament.

Dickens allows Agnes to transform these delusions into reality, which also makes her a tangible character. With her marriage to David, Dickens' heroine is able to give Betsey a real, living Betsey Trotwood for her to spoil. "My aunt's old disappointment is set right, now" (DC, 803). This is important, not only for the resolution of the novel, but it also provides a connection to the very beginning, when Betsey comes to visit Blunderstone Rookery. This "disappointment set right" also replicates David's emotions concerning his own situation. Though he loves Dora, a part of him feels that he should have married Agnes. When Betsey's delusion becomes a reality, and her disappointment is corrected, Agnes becomes more than an ideal (at least in David's mind).

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40 Gilbert Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Work of Charles Dickens (Kennikat Press, Inc.: Port Washington, 1966), p. 133.

She becomes a reality.

Throughout the novel, Mr. Micawber promises that he will change his ways and become a responsible man (never spending more than he has). As readers, we never believe him, until the end of the novel when he moves to Australia. Realistically, Micawber would never reform his ways in England and by sending him away, Dickens can create a situation where his reformation is possible. Again, in order for Agnes to be authentic and not just a symbol or manifestation placed by imaginative people, Micawber must convert. One can see the connection when Mr. Peggotty returns to England and discusses each characters' fate in Australia. "'Now, last, not least, Mr. Micawber,' said I [David]. 'He has paid off every obligation he incurred here - even Traddles' bill, you remember, *my Agnes* [my italics]- and therefore we may take it for granted that he is doing well" (DC, 800). This is deliberate on David and Dickens' part; it reaffirms the change in Micawber and connects his fate to Agnes. The interjection of "my Agnes" is completely unnecessary to the situation and the statement itself is emblematic of David's own feelings. Micawber's success, like Betsey's goddaughter, is carefully and subtly linked to Agnes, a converted and now tangible ideal.

Part of the reasoning behind David's justifying Agnes' goodness and his ability to successfully interact with an ideal stems from the disappointment of both Dora and Steerforth. Their fall causes a great deal of pain for David, because he sees them as perfect; this is his "blindness" that Betsey warns him about before his first marriage. Many people idealize their spouses or friends; but Copperfield over-idealizes people and then becomes disappointed when they are not perfect. After Annie Strong remains perfect, even after her fall, David desires the same thing for Agnes. He starts this process of reassurance in the novel even before Dora dies

(because of her fall, Dora appears beyond saving to David). Dickens hints that David is doing this, when David recalls

> There was a beggar in the street, when I went down; and as I turned my head towards the window, thinking of her [Agnes'] calm seraphic eyes, he made me start by muttering, as if he were an echo of the morning [Betsey's warning about Dora]: Blind! Blind! Blind! (DC, 480).

In this passage, one may think David is simply commenting on his relationship with Dora (and the idea that Agnes would be a better wife), but this commentary occurs when he is thinking about Agnes. This is important because, as readers, we can see his idealization of her parallel to his idealization of Dora. His first wife becomes a victim because of this idolatry; if David does not find a way of making Agnes a reality, she will fall as well.

Dickens makes a similar connection with Steerforth and the idea of his not living up to David's idealization. Steerforth is one of the novel's villains, but he is also a victim. David's idolatry is overt and his friend cannot help but notice that Copperfield thinks so highly of him. At one point, Steerforth is brooding over his misdeeds and David comes up behind him. "'You come upon me,' he said, almost angrily, 'like a reproachful ghost'" (DC, 301). This has references to *Macbeth* , with the ghost of Banquo. Here, it is hard for Steerforth to see David because of his guilt regarding Emily, which is only augmented by David's idealization. The unfortunate idol, as he comes out of his despondency, even quotes a line from *Macbeth*. "Why, being gone, I am a man again" (DC, 302). This is what Macbeth says, after Banquo's ghost leaves the hall and Steerforth inverts this as David does not leave but returns. Yet, it is obvious that David's idealization of his friend causes problems for Steerforth.

On a broader level, every ideal must eventually fall. David recognizes his problematic idealization through the Peggotty and Steerforth families. Mr. Peggotty and Mrs. Steerforth view their children as perfect, and this blindness causes much pain for both parties in each respective relationship. It is no coincidence that David witnesses the meeting of these two parents after their children simultaneously fall. Copperfield realizes that Agnes also has the potential to fall, just like every other ideal in the novel. As the emigrants are leaving for Australia, David comments that he sees a figure, "it first attracted my attention, by another figure parting from it with a kiss; and as it glided calmly away through the disorder, reminding me of - Agnes!" (DC, 745). A few lines later, we discover that this figure is Martha, a fallen woman herself. This passage represents David's greatest fear, that Agnes will be nothing more than his own undisciplined delusions. He attempts to find reassurance anywhere he can in his memory, eventually writing his own autobiography. David is not only displacing his emotions on other characters, but grasping onto their passions in an attempt to legitimize his own.

Kucich notices that there are a great many mistakes or disappointments in DC, but only David is able to correct anything (like marrying again) without suffering for it. Every other second marriage in DC is a disaster. Kucich correctly comments that

> The situations and actions that bring about resolution seem to be so highly complex and fragile that they do not result in clear cut patterns of behavior, but rather in mysterious and often fortuitous exceptions to the general rules.[41]

All these "exceptions to the general rule" are what disappoints readers and critics about this novel, especially David's second marriage. Few realize, though, that all these smaller exceptions are

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[41] Kucich, p. 151.

Copperfield's last minute attempt to justify the validity and tangibility of Agnes. The result is a fragile ending that could crumble at any time; Agnes could still fall.

We end DC with the realization that David still idealizes Agnes. This is obvious from the many passages where he still extols her perfect and angelic qualities. The novel ends with a refunneling of emotion into David. Just like Wickfield's funneling of the Vicar's emotions for his family, all the other characters in DC are returned to David's mind and his multiple feelings for Agnes are again his.

> And now, as I close my task, subduing my desire to linger yet, these faces fade away. But, one face, shining on me like a Heavenly light by which I see all other objects, is above them and beyond them all. And that remains. I turn my head, and see it, in its beautiful serenity, beside me. My lamp burns low, and I have written far into the night; but the dear presence, without which I were nothing, bears my company (DC, 806).

There is a great possibility that David idealizes Agnes more after recalling his life; each minor characters' relationship with Agnes appears only to augment her perfection. Yet the novel may still be beneficial to his marriage. Poovey comments that David's writing and Agnes' perfect housekeeping appear effortless in the novel.[42] Other critics have also noticed that David does not like to address his occupation as a writer. The writing of his autobiography (a personal diary of the past) may be a way for Copperfield to cope with his idolatry, like Mr. Wickfield's gardening. Writing DC is not a solution to David's problem, but a way to temporarily isolate himself (decreasing his diseased love), while maintaining a connection to Agnes and documenting her perfection. Perhaps Copperfield is also trying to contain his idealization of Agnes to the page.

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[42] Poovey, p. 93.

David realizes the potential problems in his marriage to Dickens' heroine and he ends DC with a quasi-prayer that summarizes why he writes his personal history.

> O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me like the shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward! (ibid.)

This is a sincere wish by David; he wants to find a way to live with his idealization of Agnes and keep her from becoming a victim, like his other infatuations. I mentioned it in my introduction, and I will repeat it here: there has been a great amount of debate as to what Agnes is pointing. In my mind, she is pointing to their life, when David stops his writing and must return to reality. When he raises his head from the page, his isolation or treatment and coping stops; he must resume his life. He hopes that Agnes will always be next to him, still with him, when he stops writing.

Conclusion

My favorite passage in DC is a conversation between Betsey and David, when they are talking about reading. To me, this puts Copperfield and Dickens' entire enterprise of writing DC, into perspective.

> 'I never thought, when I used to read books, what work it was to write them.'
>
> 'It's work enough to read them, *sometimes*,' I returned. 'As to the writing, it has its own charms, Aunt' (DC, 789).

Dickens is clever here; if this novel is truly David's work (that he never meant to be published on any account), there should be blank spots, ambiguities, and subjective statements in the text. DC ends up becoming an extension of David's idealization of Agnes, perhaps even a place where he attempts to contain his thoughts of her perfection. The entire novel is centered on Dickens' heroine and everyone loves her and idealizes her too. In all likelihood, Agnes has fallen or somehow disappointed David. Yet, with his personal history, he can maintain her perfection (in some form) and cope with the problems his idealization creates in his own life. We see the complications of loving an ideal through Mr. Wickfield and Uriah Heep. David represents Agnes' goodness and angelic perfection through Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Micawber. Dora and Steerforth serve as reminders of how dangerous and painful a ruptured ideal can be. Critics often forget that this novel, from the title and the first line, is meant to be biased, personal, and potentially subject to incredulity.

David's comment about reading and writing should remind readers that this novel does not have to make perfect sense; this is his personal work, not ours. Readers may not understand or agree with David's actions throughout the novel. When Dickens wrote DC, he was working out

his own marital problems and stereotypes regarding marriage. If any part of the second half of this novel were autobiographical, it would be this notion of negotiating an ideal. In his preface, Dickens writes "I confess . . . That no one can ever believe this Narrative, in the reading, more than I believe it in the writing" (DC, 9). I have to think he is not referring so much to the resolution of the novel; but rather to David's novel-long attempt to break free from idealizing Agnes. As readers, the question remains: Do we believe the narrative or David's attempts to live with a perfect image? Regardless of one's answer, I think the individual reader's answer will coincide with whatever preconceived notions she or he begin the novel. Romantics might take this narrative at face value, while feminists may remain abashed at numerous unfair female idealizations. Readers may not find David's purpose in writing this novel to be valid, but Agnes will remain the cynosure of any interpretation of this novel. Dickens is clever, allowing this novel to be personal, while maintaining a clear narrative focus so he does not lose his reader. This is what allows Agnes to remain central (at least subconsciously) to everyone's personal interpretation of DC.

In retrospect, I believe that I too enter DC with personal "blindness" and predispositions. At the same time, I feel that I can identify with David and understand his motives regarding Agnes. His marriage is not a compromise to the middle-class or Victorian ideal; it is a compromise between an image and reality. Whether or not David's attempts at this negotiation are a success is unimportant to me. Dickens rewards his narrator for trying to protect his beloved and himself; he allows the couple to succeed, at least within the novel. In some ways, I feel that Dickens needs this marriage between David and Agnes to prosper. He had female and marital problems for a great deal of his life; Dickens' "own charm" (as he calls it) in writing DC may have been to create

the perfect marriage, at least on the page. I see a parallel between what Dickens does for himself by writing this novel and what David is doing by fictionally writing it as well. Also, in his preface, Dickens writes:

> I do not find it easy to get sufficiently away from this Book, in the first sensations of having finished it . . . My interest in it, is so recent and strong; and my mind so divided between pleasure and regret - pleasure in the achievements 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 (ibid.).

There is a strong connection between David and Dickens in this novel. Their writing becomes personal and emotionally private. Dickens wants us to believe that, while he never succeeds in this endeavor to cope with idealization, David does (hence the inversion of the initials C.D. and D. C.). As readers, we may not understand this or even accept it; as regular people, though, it is hard not to relate on some level.

How can we not want the same thing as David? Many claim that he is an Everyman character, with whom most readers can readily identify. Part of this identification, for me, rests with the fact that it is hard to discuss this novel without using my own "personal confidences and private emotions" Dickens references in his preface. D.A. Miller begins his article with words that I think anyone could say. "For a moment in *David Copperfield*, the text raises the possibility that David might be any David; for a moment, it so happens, it invites me to imagine that he might be myself."[43] The subject of love is a personal one, yet Miller notes that our society punishes us for being too personal or subjective. I have to think that DC has been punished by critics and skeptical

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[43] Miller, p. 17.

readers for this personal, biased look at love. Ironically, though, any criticism for DC inherently reflects that person's own biases. The personal element is necessary for this to be a successful novel because it allows us to find our own individual feelings regarding love. If David and Dickens do not present their own desires and imperfections in such a manner, the book would be the opposite - not personal enough.[44] And then, who would read it?

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44 This idea on the personal and impersonal originated from a similar discussion in Miller's article, p. 18.

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