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Villain, Victim, and Hero: Structure and Theme in ***David Copperfield***

This essay emanates from a consideration of two related aspects of *David Copperfield,* one structural, the other thematic. In an article of 1948, E.K. Brown contrasted the teeming world of *David Copperfield* with the spare configurations of a more classical kind of novel.[1] Describing *Copperfield* as a "crowded" novel, he suggested that the patterns of its structure are rarely noticed because of all the hustle and bustle. Since then, analysis of *David Copperfield* has concentrated a good deal on thematic patterns that help to organize the array of characters; the most basic such study is Gwendolyn Needham's exploration of the undisciplined heart as the novel's principal motif, an idea around which the characters are grouped and through which they are compared and evaluated.[2] The following paper will extend Needham's reading of this motif by placing it within Dickens' wider conception of heroism and by exploring the question David himself raises in the opening sentence of the novel. At the same time, I want to consider the question of heroism not only as a form of thematic coherence, but also as a structural tool for organizing and developing the novel's many plots. There are some twenty-eight characters surrounding David, grouped in some seven plots and subplots.[3] They are arranged in three basic roles, victim, villain, and hero, through which each plot is developed and resolved. By investigating the nature of these roles, the way in which they reflect each other, and the variations played upon them in the various plots, we can appreciate them both as part of a structural pattern that helps Dickens to concentrate the novel's panoramic focus, and as the basis of the novel's central thematic problem, the nature of herosim.

Each of the novel's plots is initiated in an antithetical connection between the figures of villain and victim. Their qualities tend to develop in counterpoint, the most basic difference between them being the degree of their power. The villains are agents, active in the

service of their own ends. The victims are passive, enduring the villains' will because they do not have the inner force to liberate themselves. The latter function is fulfilled by another agent, who destroys the villain and releases the victim, a kind of saviour who acts heroically on behalf of others and brings the plot to its resolution. This third role generally produces the hero, the character whose blend of qualities and caliber of action provide a standard within the novel.

However, the function of this structure of roles is not purely formal and cannot be understood apart from its content. We might begin, then, by examining the three roles briefly, as they develop in each particular intrigue, in order to verify both their structural pattern and their larger thematic orientation towards the question of heroism. The opening five installments (Chapters 1-15) work out the first situation where villains and victims interact. Through the relationship of the Murdstones and the Copperfields, Dickens begins to define the nature of the villains—strong-willed but heartless, unable to respect the emotions of innocence, and their victims—creatures of unpremeditated love, helpless in the larger world of power and greed. The role of hero in this first plot remains to some extent a question. Aunt Betsey functions in part as a saviour for David, appearing briefly but ineffectually in the opening chapter and then fulfilling the promise of this visitation in Chapter 14, when she rescues David from the Murdstones' power. She wins a new life for David, saving him by her courage and her love. Yet Dickens tempers her heroism by the comedy of her behaviour and the weakness of her extreme attitudes. David himself functions partially as hero in this first episode. He forms his "great resolution" alone, and in a sense he saves himself, by having the pluck to run away and then to see his journey through. For a time, he ceases to play the passive role of victim and even though he is still a child he reveals his heroic potential by taking control of his own life. Again his heroic luster is somewhat dimmed by the comedy of the final moment, when he succumbs, in his own words, to a "passion of crying" as he gives himself up to his aunt.[4] Having done so, he becomes once again child and innocent and leaves the hero behind him on the Dover road.

David's alternation between submission to the world around him and self-direction in his thoughts and actions points us to the central problem of the novel. As David himself defines it in the opening sentence of the book: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (p. 1). In this initial episode, David seems to fall more

naturally into the role of victim than hero; by temperament he is more passive than active and except for his one sustained demonstration of resolution and courage he is content to be manipulated by others. In a sense, he is as much his Aunt's victim as the Murdstones'; she takes him and remakes him, though in a benevolent way, and he willingly accepts the new identity she creates for him, complete with his new name. David does indeed seem to trot along wherever he is bidden, as long as the guiding reins direct him gently. (The episodes at Mr. Creakle's school bear this out in a different context.) It must seem unlikely to us at this point that the spirit of a hero will emerge from such a pliant nature. Yet Aunt Betsey sets out to mold David, to remake him in her own image rather than his mother's. This tension in David runs throughout the novel. From this point on, other plots and character groupings complicate and illuminate the problem. The presence of other heroes and other victims calls attention to the question of David's role in his own story and the demands these characters make upon him shape and try his nature until the question is finally answered.

The roles of victim, villain, and hero appear with striking frequency in the world that Dickens now shapes around David. Chapter 16 introduces the intrigue framed in the relationships of Doctor Strong, Annie, and Jack Maldon. In this case, Maldon is the villain (with Uriah as his second); Doctor Strong and Annie are both his victims in a situation that eventually reaches an impasse where neither victim can liberate himself or free the other. Once again the villain takes cruel advantage of the easy and generous spirit of his victims and the victims are too mild and forbearing to act against their more forceful counterpart. In this plot, the two victims absorb most of the author's attention, while Maldon receives comparatively little. Dickens explores their separate dilemmas in depth, emphasizing that Annie and Doctor Strong, helpless as they are, have a strength of their own; as victims, they have a power of endurance if not of action, sustained by an innate sense of honour.

David watches this little drama at first with dim awareness of its depths, and Dickens uses the plot, through four well-placed chapters (16, 36, 42, and 45) to indicate the growth of David's mind over the period of his youth. David's own role in this plot is only that of observer; he does nothing to influence its progress and there is little he can do to resolve it. It is, as he explains to Mr. Dick, "Too delicate and difficult a subject for such interference" (p. 653). To interfere would be to take responsibility in disturbing the equilibrium of the

impasse and to risk losing the friendship of Doctor Strong. Yet Mr. Dick decides he is equal to the task. He does what no one else dares to do and by encouraging Annie to speak out he brings forgiveness and unity to the couple again. By acting (like Aunt Betsey) through an alloy of courage and love, Mr. Dick rescues the victims from the grip of their own guilt and from the power of Maldon's knowledge. He does so because he thinks nothing of himself.[5] He is only "simple Dick—Mad Dick" (p. 654); yet in this instance, he is the hero of the drama and he fulfills Aunt Betsey's predictions in full. In Mr. Dick, Dickens taps the long tradition of the fool as wise man, using it masterfully here in an essentially comic context. David learns much from the final episode of this plot. Dickens chooses to stress Annie's formulations of her experience, which echo through David's mind and dimly illuminate his own errors.[6] But Mr. Dick's peculiar brand of heroism also has much to teach David. To act through courage and love, abnegating the self at the same time, is precisely what David must do to win Agnes in the end.

If we turn now to the Wickfield-Heep plot, we can readily see how strongly the basic paradigm functions once again. Here Mr. Wickfield and Agnes are set against Uriah Heep in a similar opposition of passive and active roles. Mr. Wickfield is weak and easily falls prey to Uriah's schemes. Agnes is not weak, yet she is not strong either, for she lacks the capacity to act on her own behalf. As they gradually sink into Uriah's power, one feels Agnes could do something to take control and expel Uriah from his position of dominance. (Even with David, one wonders if she couldn't be more active on her own behalf, considering what she feels for him, and so perhaps prevent his infatuation with Dora.) But Agnes sees her role as a passive one, to endure Uriah's designs in silence, as she endures David's desertion in the same way.

By contrast, Uriah works actively for power over others, like the other villains we have discussed. But he absorbs much more of Dickens' attention than do the Murdstones or Jack Maldon and he emerges as a more problematical character. Dickens obviously enjoys making him loathsome and he invites us at times to respond to him with repulsion, as we do consistently to the Murdstones. Yet his conception is more complex than this simple reaction would suggest. Dickens is also interested in asking why Uriah is what he is and where the responsibility for his twisted nature lies. Uriah often alludes to the mistreatment he received as a child, and although David never accepts his arguments, we see partial justice in Uriah's claim that the

blame for his twisted self lies on certain institutions of English life. Up to a point, then, we may read Uriah as a case history in social injustice, and David's single-minded hatred for him as a measure of his youthful insensitivity to the suffering of others. David's loathing for Uriah is as obsessive and inscrutable as his love for Steerforth (Chapter 25, "Good and Bad Angels," is particularly revealing in this respect).[7] His revulsion for Uriah's person goes deep and his behaviour towards him is often mean. On the occasion when he strikes Uriah, it is Uriah who shows a finer sense of charity, forgiving David and turning the other cheek. David's performance here hardly sets the standard expected of a hero and Uriah speaks convincingly when he says to David, "You're in quite a wrong position . . . you can't make this a brave thing" (p. 621). This incident accentuates Uriah's position as a wronged man, a villain perhaps but one who has been injured in turn by others.[8].

However, the complexities of Uriah's motives and emotions generally give way to a more singular conception of his role. For the most part, he acts the part of villain and our response to him is determined basically by this function within the Wickfield plot. As with the other villains, we are encouraged to take a superior stance to him, rather than to see him in more intricate relation to ourselves. The modern reader may find it distasteful to be forced into this kind of response, but Dickens has prestructured our relationship to Uriah by reading him so fully through his role as villain. Nowhere is this done more singlemindedly than in the end (Chapter 51), where Uriah becomes pure hypocrite so that Dickens can comfortably exorcise him from the community of characters that he surveys at the novel's close. Some of us may feel that Dickens fails to do justice to Uriah here, both artistically and morally, and that the ambiguities of his nature demand a resolution of equal complexity.[9]

The hero in the Wickfield plot is Mr. Micawber, who rises to the occasion from a position of obscurity to perform the necessary act of release for the helpless victims. Like Mr. Dick, this new hero has his foibles, but he musters the courage to act and he destroys the villain with a single magnificent flourish. Of all the heroes, Mr. Micawber has the highest comic value, but this should not obscure the basic affinities he bears to the other heroes of the novel. Like them, he acts out of selfishness and love and in his case his actions demand not only courage but that crucial quality of self-discipline that is so central to Dickens' thematic conception of the novel. Like the other heroes surrounding David, Mr. Micawber stands as a touchstone by which we will measure David in the end.

Our view of Micawber's role here allows us to form a more complex sense of his value in the novel than some critics have done. To associate Micawber (and Dick) simply with the comic imagination, as Kincaid suggests, is to miss Dickens' attempt to unite the comic response with the heroic, the consciousness of gentle joy with selfless and loving action. Kincaid argues that the two are separate and contradictory, that the ideal of the disciplined heart represents an unimaginative and unintegrated selfhood, which must subjugate the gentler values of the heart:

> "[David] must, as he says so often, 'discipline' his heart. It has struck many readers that this is a terribly reductive formula for a humane and responsive existence, that it is priggish, escapist, ugly, and narrow, that it denies the values that count—those of Dora, the Micawbers, and Mr. Dick—and that this 'disciplining' is partly a euphemism for desensitizing, falsifying, sentimentalizing. All these charges are true; they are fully supported by the novel. . . . The important comic values are denied and trivial antithetical values are loudly proclaimed. David tries very hard to turn his novel into a celebration of prudence, distrust, discipline, rigid and unimaginative conduct, and the commonest sense."[10]

Any recognition of Micawber's role as hero in this plot must argue against the kind of interpretation that polarizes the values of the novel into two antithetical norms, the comic response and the disciplined response. Micawber's triumph as hero (through selflessness, courage and love—the attributes of a disciplined heart) *affirms* the comic spirit through its attitude and style. The unctuous and self-righteous villain is undone in a single, superbly comic and artistic flourish. The values of comedy and heroism are proclaimed as one, by the scene and by the hero himself.

Returning to the central notion of discipline, it is unfortunate that the word has undergone a narrowing of meaning and association, as betrayed by Kincaid's parallel terms (prudence, distrust, rigid conduct, etc.); Dickens' own conception of the word was wider and less pejorative than that of our age. By his phrase the disciplined heart, he meant to suggest not the polarized selfhood of the "representative nineteenth-century man," as Kincaid describes David (p. 163), but a new and integrated selfhood. In our own age, the same ideal has been argued by Bruno Bettelheim in strikingly similar terms.[11]

We move now to the Steerforth-Peggotty plot, the most involved of all the plots structured on the three roles of victim, villain, and hero. The pattern is complicated first by Steerforth, who appears to David

to be fitted for the role of hero until over halfway through the novel, when his true role is discovered. The reader, of course, may incline to a different impression of Steerforth right from the start; yet he cannot help being affected by David's love for him. Dickens has arranged it so that the narrator's weakness for Steerforth becomes to some degree our weakness. In Chapter 31, Steerforth is revealed finally as the villain, a man indifferent to friendship, honour, obligation, and innocence. At the core, he is no better than Heep or the Murdstones; yet he is never repugnant to us and when he dies at the end we mourn his loss with David. This is a villain, then, whom we may wish to think of "at his best"—not, as with the others, at their worst. More than any other villain, Steerforth enlarges and deepens Dickens' conception of this role.

Further complexity is woven into this plot through Steerforth's relationship to Rosa Dartle, a connection peripheral to the main action of the plot, but reflective of it in a different context. This relationship is revealed to us in snatches throughout Steerforth's story and it is only gradually that we realize the extent of Rosa Dartle's injury at Steerforth's hands. She and Emily are parallel but contrasting studies in the role of victim to the same villain. Rosa, unlike Emily, does not triumph over her suffering. Rosa's progress is from victim to a kind of villain in her own turn. Near the end, we see her lashing out at Emily and then at Mrs. Steerforth and we leave her with Mrs. Steerforth very much at her mercy.

Emily is of course Steerforth's principal victim in this plot. Her progress is the opposite of Rosa's, from victim to the role of heroine in other unspecified stories beyond the spectrum of the novel. Like Clara and Annie, Emily is at first innocent of the hidden impulses of others; she is as taken with Steerforth as David is. Dickens does not draw an explicit parallel between Emily and David with regard to Steerforth, but the analogy is there and when Emily does fall victim to Steerforth's whim, it becomes clear how thoroughly David has been duped as well. At this point—halfway through the novel—David still falls into the camp of the victims more readily than he enters the select group of heroes. He is indirectly Steerforth's victim in this case, as his trust is betrayed and his friendship is used by the villain for his own ends. David fails here in perception, as he does elsewhere with the Strongs, with Dora, and with Agnes.[12] Dickens underlines this point by giving us Agnes who, with less opportunity to observe, sees Steerforth for what he is. David's failure reveals how far he is from the role and stature of hero.

The main hero of this plot is Mr. Peggotty, who abandons all else to devote himself to finding Emily. In the words of David's aunt, Mr. Peggotty is a "self-denying soul" (p. 725) and, as with Mr. Dick and Mr. Micawber, his heroism is tied to his selflessness. Like them also, he has all the spontaneous joy and love of life that belongs to innocence (this is why he belongs so naturally in the childhood worlds of David and Emily); yet is able to endure and to triumph in the larger world as well. Mr. Peggotty seems to combine all the best qualities of the victims with the conviction and strength of the heroes. He acts when it is necessary, and his determination to find and to forgive Emily is ultimately responsible for her being recovered. More than any other hero, Mr. Peggotty represents the power of love to transform the darkness of suffering into a condition of grace. Emily's transformation into an angel of light flows from her uncle's love. Rosa has no such knowledge of love and she remans unregenerate; but Emily grows from a passive creature, victimized or succored by others, into a heroic agent in her own right.

The Peggotty story is further enriched by the use of secondary roles for other characters. Just as Steerforth is supported by Littimer in the role of villain, Mr. Peggotty is seconded by Martha and by Ham in the role of hero (we might also include Miss Moucher in this group). Littimer comes across as a one-dimensional character, a villain pure and simple, but Martha and Ham are rather more involved, conceived in terms of dualities. Both play the role of victim in the earlier part of the novel; both grow into the role of hero and become full and active agents in the plot. Martha is seduced in a similar experience to Emily's, but her life in London forms her into a woman of resolution, with all the qualities of heroism we have already discussed. It is she who is the effective cause of Emily's rescue. Ham is victimized by Steerforth and in form true to the victim, he does nothing about it. It is Mr. Peggotty who acts with a single-minded energy that, by implication, judges Ham's inaction. Ham's transformation from victim to hero occurs during the storm, the second climax of this plot (the first being the reunion of Emily and her uncle). Where the first climax shapes the plot towards an essentially comic resolution, the second alters its direction irrevocably towards tragedy. Where victim and hero are reunited in love, villain and victim then meet, but with their primary roles changed. Ham is now the heroic agent, taking action against the storm, and Steerforth is the victim, dependent upon the hero to save him. Dickens chooses death for both men, bringing them together in a powerful scene whose emotional intensity accents the intricacies of their roles.

Aside from these principal plots including and surrounding David, there are a few other characters who also fit into the pattern: Traddles, obviously cast in the role of hero vis-à-vis Sophy and her family; Aunt Betsey, in part victim in her experience with her husband but growing into a different kind of role where David is concerned as she leads him successfully into manhood and ultimately to Agnes; Miss Moucher, at first victimized by Steerforth and Littimer, but in the end acting the hero by capturing Littimer single-handedly;[13] and Mr. Micawber, clearly a victim in his general circumstances. (In case it appears that Dora has been forgotten, let me reassure the reader that she will be discussed soon in reference to David.) Some minor characters do not readily fit into the pattern: Mr. Spenlow, Julia Mills, Mr. Creakle, Mrs. Gummidge, Peggotty, and Barkis. But the pattern is there, shaping the world of *David Copperfield* through a coherent structure of action. We have a series of villains (the Murdstones, Maldon, Heep, Steerforth, and Littimer) and their victims (the child David and Clara, Annie and Doctor Strong, Agnes and Mr. Wickfield, Rosa, Emily, and Ham); each plot is structured on the opposition of one to the other and is resolved through the intervention of the hero (Aunt Betsey, Mr. Dick, Mr. Micawber, Mr. Peggotty, Martha, and Ham). These latter characters are heroes not because they preponderate over other characters in the novel; some, like Mr. Peggotty and Mr. Micawber, are characters of the first rank, but others, like, Mr. Dick and Ham, are secondary. Yet each one is a hero in that his actions set a standard for those about him, and most especially for David who observes them all. In addition, many of the victims take on heroic qualities as a result of their experience; they also set a standard, even within their positions as victims. Thus, Doctor Strong and Annie, Emily and Ham, and of course Agnes, become lights of special worth in David's eyes and he looks to them, as to the other heroes, for a standard of action worthy of his best self.

Our discussion so far has given some sense of what that standard is; what we must ask now is whether David himself meets the standard. From the very start, Dickens separates David's role as central character and narrator of the novel from the concept of the hero. The problem, then, is whether David unites them in the end. If we were to examine the problem structurally, we might search for a plot in which David intervenes to resolve a conflict between a villain and a victim. But there is no such case in the novel, and in fact we come to expect the opposite of David, because we see him so often standing by the sidelines while other characters take on the burden of decision and action to save the victims from their tormentors. David watches Mr.

Dick bring Annie and Doctor Strong together, he watches Mr. Micawber expose Heep, he waits and receives Mr. Piggotty's reports on his search for Emily and watches their reunion at the end, he even watches Ham attempt to save the drowning Steerforth. On the level of point of view, we can see that it is his function as narrator to observe as many of these actions as possible, but on the level of character, we find that his own image is affected by the constant passivity of his role. There are many times when we must wonder if he could not do something himself to affect the resolution of these plots. Of course there are reasons in every case why he does not take the role of hero: he is too young with the Strong plot, he does not have the hard information on Heep in the Wickfield plot, he is not really free to pursue Emily, and so on. Yet the fact remains that he pales beside the heroes who do act; by comparison with them his stature suffers.

It suffers, however, not simply because he lacks the resources to act in these cases. More important, his perception of the characters involved is often shallow and incomplete. This is David's greatest failing—and the main obstacle to his taking a hero's role. David does not discriminate sharply enough in his judgment of others and because his perceptions are tenuous and ill-defined, his actions are also. Dickens shapes several of the plots surrounding David in such a way as to underscore this weakness and David's role as narrator allows us to watch his perception in action. We have noted that the chapters of the Strong plot are placed with a view to reflecting the growth of David's insights and in his own interpretation, the climax of the story illuminates his own failure in judgment (where Dora is concerned) as much as Annie's. Absorbed as he is by the mess of his own marriage, David seems far from Mr. Dick's clear-sighted grasp of the situation and his quick, clean act of intervention to bring the Strongs together. The Steerforth-Peggotty plot goes even further, implicating David directly in the catastrophe. Here his failure to see Steerforth for what he is (as well as his rather simplistic reading of the relationship between Emily and Ham) makes him partly responsible for the dissolution of the Peggotty household. His perceptions and actions in this plot place him far from any heroic role that might restore order. Similarly in the Wickfield-Heep plot, David's perceptions are dim and his actions blunted. His hatred for Uriah exceeds justification and yet it does not spur him to any action except a useless slap on the face. He does nothing to investigate the Wickfield concerns and yet his position in the family as an adopted and trusted son makes it his rightful role to act and save the victims. Most crucially, he does not discern anything of Agnes' love for him, when even Dora fathoms her true feelings. David does indeed seem to be "blind, blind, blind," at least to the intricacy of other people's inner lives and

a blind hero, weak in perception and action, is a contradiction in terms.

David's own story, through the period of his youth and his first marriage, grows out of the novel's basic paradigm of roles and here the surrounding plots, all patterned on the same roles, do much to illuminate David's personal progress. When David is adopted by his aunt and given his new name, he is given a new identity and cast into a new role. No longer the child-victim, knocked about by the fortunes of life, he must show himself now to be a staunch young man and grow to self-sufficiency and strength in all his actions. That he should be "the hero of [his] own life" is precisely what his aunt intends for him and so she sets him on his own in Canterbury, where he can develop in the gentle yet demanding environment of Doctor Strong's school. David does well enough in his studies and later he proves himself in other ways, patiently working himself up to proficiency in his various professions and rising to the challenge of his aunt's financial ruin. Here he stands parallel to Traddles and opposite to Steerforth, in managing to make a respected place for himself in the social order. Despite occasional lapses such as his dissipation with Steerforth, David seems well fitted for the role of hero. His new attachment to Dora seems to put the seal on his role. In their courtship, Dora plays the helpless victim and David the saviour-hero.[14] He wins Dora by proving himself worthy to her father, rescuing her from the clutches of Miss Murdstone and liberating her into the bliss of a happy marriage. Or so it seems. But these traditional roles of courtship conceal a much more complex situation. Dora is indeed helpless. Like so many of the other victims of the novel, she is innocent and weak (we think of Emily and Clara); indeed she seems to be an exact parallel to David's mother, born to be manipulated by others stronger than herself. And David soon finds himself taking the role of manipulator. He sets out to change Dora and make her more efficient to his needs, but in the process, his relationship to her modulates into something uncomfortably similar to the Murdstones' victimization of Clara. The irony here is obvious. David seems to be reenacting the situation of his childhood, only with his own role reversed. No longer the passive victim, he now takes the active role, feeling his power over Dora and putting the same kind of pressure on her as he had to bear himself with his mother under the Murdstones' domination. Of course, the parallel in the two situations is more on the side of the victims than the villains, and we cannot simply label David's role here as that of villain, without qualifying the term to some degree. David's actions are not sadistic, as are the Murdstones', and his motives are not malevolent, though they may be selfish. When he realizes that Dora is not meant to change and grow to full maturity, he accepts her and

loves her as she is, his "child-wife." But by then it is already too late; Dora is dying. By making her so fully aware of her failure, David has blighted her innocence and destroyed her immediate joy in life. He has caused the blossom to wither and die and he bears the burden of his guilt in full recognition of his responsibility. Thus, David's actions and motives may not be as damnable as the Murdstones', but the ultimate result of his conduct is the same. Both Clara and Dora die, taking their infants with them, because they are took weak to survive in the harsh world that has destroyed the Edenic haven of their minds.

Thus, the paradigm of victim, villain, and hero is worked out in David's courtship and marriage with a rather disturbing twist. What seems at first to be the conventional and happy union of the hero and his weaker counterpart turns into something perilously close to the relation of villain to victim. And this is the more distressing as we have identified our feelings with David's and taken his part in his struggle for happiness. We do no want to think of David as villain; yet his role here bears affinities to that of other villains in the novel. We want him to succeed and be the hero of his own life; yet he undoubtedly falls far short of that role where Dora is concerned. His actions do not meet the standard of the heroes who surround him: after Dora dies, David still has much to learn about selflessness, discipline, courage and love.

It is in the final installment of the novel that David undergoes his deepest trial and emerges from it with the stature worthy of a hero. When he plunges into darkness after Dora's death, he surrenders his spirit to a sea of confusion, misery, and guilt. Here David falls back into the posture of victim, giving himself up to forces stronger than himself rather than meeting them with equal power of spirit and will. In this instance it is Agnes who saves him, and by her own example transforms him into a hero. Like the other heroes of the novel, she is free of self-regarding motives; she acts out of love, intervening to resolve a situation that has reached an impasse, where the victim is unable to help himself. She writes to David and argues the essential point of heroism, that "sorrow could not be weakness, but must be strength" (p. 815). This, we realize, has been the vital element in the actions of all the heroes and all the victims who have learned the discipline of heroism. Heroism is grounded in the mastery of personal suffering (we may think here of Mr. Dick, Mr. Peggotty, Aunt Betsey, Ham, Emily, Agnes, even Mr. Micawber); all the novel's heroes have seen their own worlds blighted in some way, but they have put their desolation aside, refusing to remain locked in the passivity of such feelings. The hero takes the active way, and in acting for others he is forced to transform his weakness into strength. His own losses

become the ground on which all the qualities of heroism can flourish—courage, selflessness, wisdom, discipline, and love. For Dickens, heroism is a difficult road which involves the knowledge and mastery of suffering. This is the central thesis of *David Copperfield* and it is embodied and explored both in the pattern of roles for the secondary characters and in David's own growth towards his ultimate role as hero.

In the final installment of the novel, Dickens concentrates on David's transformation into hero. The account, however, may seem unconvincing to many readers, not because of any real deficiency in David's character but simply because of problems in Dickens' narrative method. At this point, Dickens seems to feel the need to close the novel as quickly as he possibly can and he rushes through this part of David's story in a way that cannot do it justice. One six-page chapter covers David's absence and his transformation, and even more crucially—to recall the classic dichotomy in narrative method—David's account renders the crisis in generalities, by telling rather than showing. This weakens David's credibility at the very point in his story when he needs the greatest credence, as he looks inward to assess his own nature and convince the reader of his worth. Other sections of the novel are narrated without particulars and without dramatic presentation, but the most important parts and the parts that we remember are all dramatically rendered, in scenes whose impact is strong. There is nothing here in David's account of his own personal odyssey to match the intensity of such scenes as the discovery of Emily's disappearance, the exposure of Heep, the account of Dora's death, or the storm. Compared to these events, the deepening of David's nature through suffering seems to pale, even though it is their equal as a subject in every way. The narrative here is weak and perhaps unconvincing because it is rendered in generalities, without the inclusion of a single particular scene or human relationship that would flesh out David's suffering and make his acceptance of the discipline of heroism seem real.[15]

In a sense then, we must take David's struggle on faith, and believe him when he tells us that he "tried to get a better understanding of [himself] and be a better man" (p. 818). But Dickens does not leave it at that. He gives us proof of David's inner strength in his relationship to Agnes. Here we see David enacting the discipline of heroism.[16] He renounces the claims of his own feelings for her sake and devotes himself to being what her vision of him demands: "My duty to Agnes, who loved me with a love which, if I disquieted, I wronged most selfishly and poorly, and could never restore; my matured assurance that I, who had worked out my own destiny, and won what I had impetuously set my heart on, had no right to murmur and must bear;

comprised what I felt and what I had learned" (p. 857). It is the final happy irony of the novel that Agnes' real vision of David is as her lover and husband and that there is no conflict, but rather a perfect harmony, between David's secret love and Agnes' happiness.[17] When David decides to break his vow of silence, he shows himself the equal of other heroes of the novel. He acts swiftly and decisively. He has the strength to take the risk of speaking because he speaks for her sake. Because his love is selfless, he can argue with passion that he is worthy of her at last:

> For Heaven's sake, Agnes, let us not mistake each other after all these years, and all that has come and gone with them! I must speak plainly. If you have any lingering thought that I could envy the happiness you will confer; that I could not resign you to a dearer protector, of your own choosing; that I could not, from my removed place, be a contented witness of your joy; dismiss it, for I don't deserve it! I have not suffered quite in vain. You have not taught me quite in vain. There is no alloy of self in what I feel for you. (p. 861)

This speech *is* convincing. As David divines Agnes' real love through her tears and reveals his own, we feel that he is equal to the role he has sought from the beginning; in creating such harmony out of their two separate miseries, he has indeed turned out to be the hero of his own life.[18]

It would seem, then, that David reflects aspects of all three roles on which the novel's plots are structured. In his childhood and youth, he chooses a passive role for the most part, and repeatedly plays victim to others stronger and less scrupulous than himself. In some relationships, he puts himself into a position of power over others and his actions seem hardened and insensitive (as when he slaps Uriah or attempts to remake Dora). Finally by making Agnes his own, he rises to the heroic standard of action already set by the other heroes of the novel. Viewed from this perspective, the function of the characters surrounding David is to define the limits of his own experience. The roles they play in their various relationships with each other become standards internal to David, by which he measures himself. The proper completion of the novel cannot be found in the resolution of any of the plots surrounding David, but only in the resolution of David's own position. As it turns out, the heroes surrounding David are his principal mentors, and the end of his journey into maturity is defined by the standard of heroism they set. At the same time, the paradigm of villain, victim, and hero orders the author's vision, allowing him to present an enormous canvas with clarity and control.

The three main roles thus form a unified perspective through which author, narrator, and reader may apprehend and judge a complex world.

NOTES

1. "David Copperfield," *Yale Review*, 37 (June 1948), 659-660.
2. Before Needham's article, Edgar Johnson had dealt with the problem of unity in a different light (*Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, New York, 1952, pp. 677-700). He singled out elements of the novel that emanated from Dickens' most intense feelings—the magic of childhood emotions, the passionate desire for education, the succession of surrogate parents, the enchantment of youthful love—pointing out the intermingled strands of fact and fantasy; and he argued that what unified all this material was David's own "suffusion of feeling," the light of "emotional veracity" in which the story is bathed from beginning to end (p. 690). Agreeing on the importance of feeling within the frame of retrospection, Gwendolyn Needham then explored the ideal of discipline in an exhaustive way, proving that David too must temper feeling with control. Arguing that the statement of this theme in Chapter 45 (the climax of the Dr. Strong plot), Needham applied it to each major character, bringing the various experiences in the novel together under this one motif ("The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9 [1954], 81-107). After Needham's article, various additional aspects of thematic unity were singled out for discussion. J. Hillis Miller (*Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, Cambridge, Mass., 1959) suggested that *David Copperfield* is "before everything else a novel of memory, a *Bildungsroman* recollecting from the point of view of a later time the slow formation of an identity . . ." (p. 152). Unity is thus created through David's memory. However, Miller argues that there is another "unifying presence" external to David, a "providential spirit that has determined the cohesion of events and their inalterable necessity" (p. 155); and he goes on to explore the contradictory aspects of David's providential yet self-determining vision of his life. In a detailed essay on the Carlylean parallels in *David Copperfield*, Richard J. Dunn explored self-discovery and moral regeneration as the central experience of the novel ("David Copperfield's Carlylean Re-Tailoring," *Dickens the Craftsman*, ed. R.B. Partlow, Jr., Carbondale, Illinois, 1970). Harvey Sucksmith discussed the "complex unity" of Dickens' novels as a combination of the "compassionate and ironic visions"; in *David Copperfield*, sympathy and irony come together in the single consciousness of the narrator (*The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens*, Oxford, 1970, p. 325). There was also a series of more critical interpretations of thematic unity in *David Copperfield*. Typical perhaps of the year of its publication, Monroe's Engel's study (*The Maturity of Dickens*, Cambridge, Mass., 1967) reduced the novel to the theme of "worldly prudence," and conversely "the dangers of inprudence and trust" (p. 148). Barbara Hardy saw moral conversion, the "change of heart," at the center of the novel, but claimed that the theme itself is flawed, based on the "fallacy that correlates vision and action" (*The Moral Art of Dickens*, London 1970, p. 57). More crucially in my view, James R. Kincaid argued that there is a basic split in the novel between "the comic world of the imagination, and the threatening and hostile world of practical or commercial 'reality'," and that this is the crucial issue of the novel. David "tries very hard to turn his novel into a celebration of . . . discipline," but the "inadequacy" of this value is "signalled to the reader time and time again (*Dickens and The Rhetoric of Laughter*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 164 & 165). To this last argument, and to several of the others as well, I shall return in the course of this essay.

   This review of ideas on the central theme and the unity of *David Copperfield* is not intended to be exhaustive, but to demonstrate the range of approaches and the absence of any consideration of unitive patterns within the structure of the plot itself. While various critics have noted tightly organized plots in Dickens' other novels, no one has explored *David Copperfield* for the inter-relationship of its three basic roles, or the elaboration of this plot pattern in terms of both structure and theme.

3. If we group the characters according to their primary relationships, we might outline the basic plots as follows:
   Clara, Peggotty, the Murdstones, David as child
   Aunt Betsey, Mr. Dick, (Aunt Betsey's husband)
   Dora, Mr. Spenlow, Julia Mills, David as youth
   Doctor Strong, Annie, Jack Maldon, the Old Soldier
   Agnes, Mr. Wickfield, Uriah Heep
   Mr. Micawber and family
   Emily, Ham, Mr. Peggotty, Mrs. Gummidge, Martha
   Steerforth, Rosa Dartle, Mrs. Steerforth, Littimer, Miss Moucher, Traddles, Sophy and family.

   A few of these groups seem complete as lesser intrigues in their own right (for example, Steerforth's relationship with Rosa or Aunt Betsey's with her husband), but for the most part the groups do not remain separate. Characters cross into the realm of other relationships and perform villainous or heroic functions which create or complete the plots. Thus, Mr. Dick acts within the Strong triangle to resolve the impasse, and Mr. Micawber does likewise in the Wickfield-Heep intrigue. In a different way, Steerforth enters the Peggotty circle to complicate its set pattern (the engagement of Ham and Emily), creating an intrigue which others must resolve. David of course stands at the center of this complex of plots, involved himself to varying degrees in each one.
4. *David Copperfield*, Oxford, 1947, p. 141. All subsequent quotations from the novel will be identified by page number in the text.
5. "I'll bring them together, boy. I'll try. They'll not blame *me*. They'll not object to *me*. They'll not mind what *I* do, if it's wrong. I'm only Mr. Dick. And who minds Dick? Dick's nobody! Whoo!' He blew a slight contemptuous breath, as he blew himself away" (p. 654).
6. See Needham, pp. 100-103.
7. Alexander Welsh explores the idea of Uriah as a double for David, noting the strange extremes in David's behaviour to Uriah (*The City of Dickens*, Oxford, 1971 pp. 132-133.
8. We should not forget that Uriah bears the name of a wronged man; and David, in this incident at least, seems to act as the counterpart to his namesake, King David, who also took advantage of his superior position to Uriah the Hittite.
9. We seem to be dealing here in part with the opposition of romance and realism, of type characters, whose actions follow a general pattern largely determined by their role, and individualized characters with more complex motives for what they do. As several critics have pointed out, Dickens' type characters are allied with those of romance and fairy tale (see M.C. Kotzin, *Dickens and The Fairy Tale*, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1972, and also Harry Stone, "Dickens, Cruikshank, and Fairy tales," *George Cruikshank: A Revaluation*, ed. R.L. Patten, Princeton, 1974). The roles of villain, victim, and hero, repeated with such paradigmatic force through all the plots, constitute a strong pull towards a simplified and typed view of human behaviour; yet at the same time, a more complex view of character is also present, and Dickens is able to realize at least some of the characters as full individuals who transcend the formula even as they participate in it. For the most part, romance and realism work together in Dickens' hands to create a rich and profound vision. But the two impulses are sometimes at odds, and it seems to me that some of the special problems of *David Copperfield* result from this tension. Uriah is a case in point.
10. *Dickens and The Rhetoric of Laughter*, pp. 163-164.
11. "Heart and reason can no longer be kept in their separate places. . . . The daring heart must invade reason with its own living warmth, even if the symmetry of reason must give way to admit love and the pulsation of life. No longer can we be satisfied with a life where the heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know. Our hearts must know the world of reason, and reason must be guided by an informed heart (*The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*, New York, 1960, p. viii).
12. Taylor's Stoehr's remarks in *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance* (Ithaca, New York, 1965) on patterns of plot development in the later novels (*Great Expectations* and after) have some relevance here to David's position. He discusses the basic split in these novels between the "apparent strand of action" and the "hidden strand," and the pressure upon the hero, when the latter is fully revealed to him, for atonement and change (pp. 226 ff.).
13. Most readers are aware of the reasons why Dickens did an about-face on Miss Moucher.

changing her from one of Steerforth's villainous cohorts (as she appears in Chapter 22) into one of his victims, duped by Steerforth and used to further his own ends (See chapter 32). Miss Moucher achieves her dual role as victim and hero through an external pressure upon the author, rather than through any plan integral to the novel, and the shift in her portrait appears arbitrary and illegitimate from an artistic point of view. This, however, does not affect our description of the ultimate shape of the novel as we have it. For an account of the incident with Mrs. Hill, see Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph,* pp. 674-675.

14. In his chapter on the hero as lover, Joseph Campbell describes the hero's relation to his bride in terms of a similar conception of their roles: "She is . . . the bride abducted from the jealous father, the virgin rescued from the unholy lover. She is the 'other portion' of the hero himself . . . She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance. But where he is ignorant of his destiny, or deluded by false considerations, no effort on his part will overcome the obstacles" (*The Hero with A Thousand Faces,* New York, 1949, p. 342). The suggestions made here apply both to Dora and to Agnes, both of whom David accepts as images of his own destiny at various points in his life (see especially David's description of Agnes at the very end of the novel).
15. This argument may to some extent neutralize Barbara Hardy's objections to David's easy progress to the ideal: "In *David Copperfield* we are shown a very neat graph of progress: once David sees that his heart is undisciplined, the path ahead is fairly smooth and straight, and Dickens, here as elsewhere, illustrates what seems to me to be a moral and psychological fallacy, the fallacy of identifying diagnosis with remedy" (*The Moral Art of Dickens,* p. 130). While the description here is actually inaccurate (David does not "march on to improvement and conversion" along a path "smooth and straight"), the presentation makes it seem so, by being evasive, and as Hardy herself suggests, by dealing "in summary" rather than showing "in action" (p. 131).
16. Richard Dunn has pointed out the Carlylean parallels here ("David Copperfield's Carlylean Retailoring"). Both authors affirm the necessity of actions to fulfill the potential of vision. As Dunn argues, "we [must] remember the contexts of both Teufelsdrockh's and Copperfield's visions, for both come before spiritual regeneration is complete, and neither vision in itself causes regeneration (p. 111). In this context, Dunn quotes two appropriate passages from *Sartor Resartus* (p. 111 and p. 113): "Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into Conduct" (II, ix); our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, *Know Thyself;* till it be translated into this partially possible one, *Know what thou canst work at*" (II, vii).
17. For an interesting argument on Agnes as an angel of death, ever 'pointing upward,' see Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens,* pp. 180-184. Welsh posits David's undisciplined heart as a mode of resistance to her seraphic eyes and their otherwordly gaze. In his own words: "Angels are so supremely confident that a hero's happiness is not of this world that one scarcely trusts oneself alone with them" (p. 183). While Welsh's reading of the novel's close as an analogy to the close of life, and of Agnes' basic connection with death in David's mind, is tantalizing, we need to remember that Agnes leads David back to life first, to his artistic creativity, to love, and to family. If Agnes presides over death, she also presides over life, although we do not see the latter commitment crystallized in anything like the gesture that belongs to the former.
18. Again this view of David's active heroism (taking into account the Carlyean parallels as well) may somewhat mitigate Barbara Hardy's objection that "David's process [of growth] is only briefly one of discipline, and then the artist's wish-fulfilment disposes of Dora and what remains is less a stern moral test than the slow discovery that Agnes is the rock on which he should found his love" (*The Moral Art of Dickens,* p. 42). This discovery is made first, completing David's process of self-knowledge. His heroic actions in Chapter 62 are quite another thing.