David Copperfield, a Study in Progress

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In the case of Dickens's novels in general, and *David Copperfield* in particular, there is a tendency among critics to cherry-pick: to say one character is outstanding and another character is a symptom of Dickens's weakness, without regard to the structure of the novel as a whole. I believe G. K. Chesterton provides the most eloquent example of this tendency. He claims to discover something new and inspired in *David Copperfield* — a new realism — and then to be disappointed by something equally new for Dickens in the latter chapters of the novel, which Chesterton calls "fatigue" (v).

If I may address this paper primarily to Chesterton (as the brilliant spokesman for a common point of view), I think Chesterton is partly right, as he is more often than not. This novel does administer a strong dose of realism (though I doubt that it is harsher in its characterization of unpleasant realities than the earlier *Martin Chuzzlewit*). And to Chesterton's credit, he doesn't pretend that the perceived weaknesses are anything really new. His point is that the various turns of plot that produce the obligatory happy ending are out of place in this new venture into realism, and Dickens, through a spiritual torpor that really is new to him, abandons the inspired project of the first part of the novel to bring about David's empty contentment in the latter part.

However winningly Chesterton makes this point, I feel his

basic reaction to the elements in *David Copperfield* is predictable and amounts to asking Dickens to be something other than he actually is. (In all fairness, I am only sure that Chesterton's reaction is predictable now, a full century after Chesterton's critique. This way of regarding Dickens's novels may have originated with Chesterton. He was a distinguished writer and a true admirer of Dickens, and not a critic I would accuse of resorting to a cliché.)

In sum, Chesterton praises both of the Micawbers (he especially admires Mrs. Micawber's lucid rationalizations), and he dotes on Dora and all the silly inconveniences she heaps on David's back. But he deplores what he sees as the way Dickens gets rid of these and other inconvenient characters, either by death, in the case of Dora, or transportation, shipping off Mr. Peggotty, Em'ly (whom I shall just call "Emily"), and the Micawbers to Australia. With Dora dead, David can have a peaceful (and boring) married life with Agnes; and David will no longer be saddled with the problems — the intractable problems, as Chesterton deems them — of the Micawbers and the Peggottys.

In this paper, my goal is to show that Dickens is not abandoning his original plan. He has a theme, which might simply be called the theme of selfishness (allowing the negative word to represent the opposite state of selflessness as well), and he has a basic plot that involves a certain kind of not-so-modest progress on the part of David. As Chesterton rightly observes, the novel is autobiographical, hardly in every detail, I would add, but in a surprising number of details. Since Chesterton's ultimate — and commendable — point is to insist on Dickens's genius, I feel he ought to allow that David's successes in the latter half of the novel are both plausible and intrinsically worthwhile. They are lovingly described, and Dickens's own successes are their jus-

tification.

This paper will be divided into three parts: the first will be a plot summary for those who haven't read the novel. (It can be skipped by those who have a fresh memory of the plot.) The second will be a much briefer pointer to the progress David makes on his march to success. The third will treat Dickens's development of the theme of selfishness. I will try to show that Dickens is following a plan, not abandoning his original project. There will also be two appendices: one dealing with Dora's death, the other with the charge that the transportation solves nothing.

The plot: David Copperfield's happiness is threatened from the beginning of the novel. As narrator of the story, David recounts his own birth as it was described to him by his mother.

Mrs. Copperfield's husband has died, and her only friend is the faithful nurse, Peggotty. She is isolated, miserable, and pregnant. Things suddenly look up for her with the appearance of her late husband's eccentric sister Betsey Trotwood. In her dictatorial but kind way, Betsey sees Mrs. Copperfield through her labor, taking charge of everything. Unfortunately for David and his mother, Betsey's eccentricities include an absolute conviction that the child will be a girl, whose name, she insists, must be Betsey, after herself. Taking David's gender as a personal affront, she departs in a huff.

This bit of irrationality deprives David's mother of the only advisor who could have an impact on her search for a suitable husband. She ends, against the advice of Peggotty, by marrying a morose predator named Murdstone. This turns out to be a tragic mistake. After a honeymoon, which David spends happily in the warmhearted household of Mr. Peggotty, brother of the nurse, David is subjected to a regi-

men of bullying that never stops while he resides in the house. The real purpose of the bullying is to break the spirit of David's mother.

David is sent off to Salem House, an inferior school for young gentlemen. Ever careful with his own fortune — and with the Copperfield fortune, which he has appropriated — Murdstone chooses the cheapest school possible. Here, despite Mr. Creakle, the owner, who reminds us of Wackford Squeers of *Nicholas Nickelby*, David has some good luck. The leader of the schoolboys is a young aristocrat named Steerforth, whom even Mr. Creakle fears to offend. Steerforth recognizes David's gift for telling stories (thanks to David's reading of *The Arabian Nights, Tales of the Genii*, and the most famous English novels to date [53]), and makes David the boys' unofficial storyteller. Thus, a school that can hardly be distinguished from Squeers' has a certain magic for David. He worships Steerforth and thoroughly enjoys his special position among the boys. David also meets a lifelong friend, the decent and honorable Tom Traddles.

On the worst birthday of his life, David is called home because his mother has died. The death is due partly to the hard time she had bearing a second child — a son, who has also died and will be buried in her arms — but more, as Aunt Betsey later comments (203), to the campaign of Murdstone and his witchlike sister to break her spirit.[1] Besides the emotional trauma of losing his mother and baby brother, this looks like the end of David's education. Murdstone treats David as an unwelcome freeloader in his house (though David was born in the house) and sends him off to London to earn his own bread at a menial job, tending empty liquor bottles. For David, this social demotion seems like the end of all his prospects.

David's depression and the reader's mood are leavened consid-

erably by the appearance of Mr. Micawber and his uncanny wife, who live in a nearby flat. Micawber is perpetually in debt and shamelessly exploits the kind people who lend him money. One of his endearing quirks is to treat David like an adult. He constantly refers to David as "friend of my youth," though Micawber is at least approaching middle age.

It should be stressed here that David is not one of Micawber's victims, pace Chesterton. Though much of Chesterton's positive comment on the novel refers to the Micawbers, he numbers David among Micawber's creditors.[2] This is a strange mistake for such an eminent critic. Late in the novel, David the narrator reflects that part of Mr. Micawber's particular kindness to him throughout their relationship was never to have hit him up for money. In any case, Micawber is entertaining on both levels: his groundless, grandiloquent optimism has even added a word to the English language (*Micawberism*), and he lifts young David's spirits during this dark period.

Finally, David decides on a desperate measure. He will gather a few of his belongings together and walk to Dover, where Aunt Betsey Trotwood lives. This trip is inspired by a chance memory of his mother. During her pregnancy, with Betsey handling things, she once noticed, in a half-sleep, that her hair was being tenderly smoothed. This was the only sentimental display Betsey ever showed her, and Mrs. Copperfield wasn't sure it had really happened. David bases all his hopes on the kindness implicit in the gesture.

The outcome of this trek to Dover is entirely positive. David is accepted by Aunt Betsey and becomes her ward. He meets her other ward, the deranged but infallibly kind Mr. Dick. And he is allowed to resume his education in the excellent and humane school of Dr. Strong

in Canterbury. For this purpose, David lives in the house of Mr. Wickfield and his pretty daughter Agnes. Along with his aunt, but more obviously, Agnes is the kindest member of the other sex that David has ever met. He looks on her as a dear sister. Agnes becomes an emblem of how thoroughly his life has changed. Despite the sly stratagems of the reptilian Uriah Heep, a working-class secretary of Agnes's father, David's youth is fortified by having a confidante in Agnes who will do anything for him and asks nothing of him.

As David enters adulthood, he progresses slowly at first and then by leaps and bounds. He finishes school and with his aunt's money is initiated into a lucrative, if superfluous, branch of the legal profession, with his mentor being a law official, a *proctor*, named Mr. Spenlow. This in turn leads to David's introduction to Mr. Spenlow's daughter, Dora, by whom he is utterly enthralled. David secretly but sincerely courts Dora, who is flirtatious and silly but bewitching. It transpires that Mr. Spenlow has other plans for his daughter. It is also clear to the reader that Aunt Betsey thinks David's preference is a terrible mistake, but she refrains from sharing this insight with him. Whereupon, Mr. Spenlow dies suddenly, and with the cooperation of Dora's elderly aunts, David and Dora marry.

The marriage turns out to be a mixed blessing. Dora, it emerges, can manage nothing at all. She relies absolutely on servants but has no power to properly select them or to curb their laziness and pilfering. The household is in constant disarray. Even so, David loves his little wife, and she loves him; and despite having to manage everything for both of them, he succeeds in switching to a more honest profession: that of court reporter. He teaches himself the agonizing art of shorthand writing and proceeds to eke out an honest living.

David then turns from court reporting to fiction, at first quietly sending in stories to magazines, which are accepted, then building a reputation based on the quality and popularity of the stories under his name, and ultimately expanding to full novels. Thus David becomes famous and financially independent while he is still young.

David's progress in this part of the novel helps to solve the financial problems of Aunt Betsey, who is bankrupted by a plot that exploits her refusal to sue her legal council, Agnes's father, Mr. Wickfield. This bit of melodrama turns out to involve Uriah Heap. Uriah has taken advantage of Mr. Wickfield's alcoholism to assume control of his law firm. He has caused the irregularities that Aunt Betsey refuses to shame Mr. Wickfield by exposing. Suffice it to say that David's new income has already solved Aunt Betsey's problems by this point, and Uriah is ultimately exposed by none other than Mr. Micawber, who has been working, with boiling discontentment, as his clerk. Uriah has even been plotting to blackmail Agnes into marrying him. Now, thanks to the legal help of David's old friend Traddles and the laboriously documented revelations of Mr. Micawber (a natural writer of long documents), Uriah has to relinquish his business in disgrace.

In the meantime, Dora has had a failed period of gestation from which she never recovers. She grows steadily weaker and finally dies, not without telling Agnes in confidence that if David ever marries again, the only person she would approve of is Agnes. With Dora dead, and after a decent period of mourning, David begins to look on Agnes in a less fraternal light, and he eventually (as Aunt Betsey divines he will) works up the nerve to propose to her. Agnes not only accepts but confesses that she has loved him all her life.

There is one subplot that must be mentioned. David has had a lifetime relationship with his devoted nurse Peggotty, and this has led to a friendship with her brother Mr. Peggotty and his younger relative Ham. David's friend and idol Steerforth becomes a favorite visitor at the humble Peggotty house. Mr. Peggotty and Ham are fishermen, and Steerforth often joins them on their boat. But as we have been forewarned by many nuances and events, Steerforth is not a true friend. He dazzles Mr. Peggotty's niece, Emily, who is now a young woman, with promises of making her a lady, despite her working-class background — and despite the fact that she is engaged to Ham. Emily is a warm-hearted girl, but she is also intelligent and ambitious, and she longs to become a lady. She proves easy prey for Steerforth.

This furtive courtship is never presented. We only learn about it when Emily flees to the continent with Steerforth, confident that he will marry her. Steerforth eventually abandons Emily, leaving her a note with some money enclosed offering her the chance to marry his sinister old servant. She is mortified and subdued by this experience. She wants neither the money nor the servant. Mr. Peggotty is completely devoted to his niece and sets out to find her. He walks many miles in France and Italy, where Emily has been seen. Ham forgives her completely, though he never meets her again. Rather too coincidentally, Ham dies trying to save the survivor on a storm-ruined ship, who turns out to be Steerforth. Both Ham and Steerforth drown. With David's help, Mr. Peggotty finds Emily. In the end, Mr. Peggotty, Emily, the Micawbers, and a few others (including the young Micawbers) resolve to start a new life in Australia.

Returning to David's own life, now that he has a wife who is both loving and capable, he has reached the final stage of fulfillment.

David's triumphant progress: As the above plot summary suggests, the direction of David's development in the novel is upward on all levels. As he matures, he improves socially, professionally, and personally. We can see his development as moving through three stages. First is his life with his poor, tormented mother and the Murdstones, with welcome intermissions at Mr. Peggotty's house and the Salem House, where he meets Steerforth and Traddles; next is his life with Aunt Betsey and the Wickfields, with whom he lives while attending Dr. Strong's school in Canterbury. This is enhanced by the companionship of Mr. Dick, Agnes, and eventually Traddles. It is also modified by the unwelcome presence of Uriah Heep. Then there is his life with Dora. For all its aggravations, married life features David's hard-earned success as a court reporter, able to write shorthand, the learning of which he describes as excruciating. The period also includes David's emergence as a professional writer. And finally, there is the life after Dora's death, with Agnes as the proper wife for a famous writer, someone who can do more for David than hold his pens, as Dora did.

The first stage is remembered for threats and abuse, but also for the protection of Peggotty, whose home is an oasis where he can temporarily forget the house now dominated by the Murdstones. David also has the protection of Steerforth at Salem House. It is, after all, Steerforth who perceives David's story-telling ability and makes David a popular figure with his classmates. There are already hints that Steerforth is a terrible egotist in the making, but he certainly is kind to David, and it is only natural for David to idolize him.[3]

After the nightmare of home life with the Murdstones, the second phase is such a step upward that it could be the happy ending of a lesser novel. Aunt Betsey turns out to be both wise and compassionate.

Whilst her constant insistence on Mr. Dick's brilliance is eccentric, it shows Betsey's compassion for the weak and her appreciation for innocence. It soon becomes clear that she will treat David as well as she treats Mr. Dick. David's school is a huge improvement, despite the absence of Steerforth and Traddles, and David has the chance to confide every day in Agnes, who, we later learn, has loved David from the first. David endured the bullying of Murdstone and witnessed the Murdstones' homicidal abuse of his mother, so we shouldn't begrudge him this improvement unless we can't take the novel seriously.

The next step is David's adult life. On the professional level, this involves the kind of development that is denied normal people because it is truly autobiographical, and Dickens was at the very least a great English novelist. First, David becomes understudy for the highly respectable, if ineffectual, position of proctor. Then he becomes a court reporter for a London newspaper. Court reporter is a less exalted and surely a lower-paying position than proctor, but Dickens is treating real value. The former position is basically a sinecure, which is why David is offered bribes (which he declines) to let someone else take his place instead of just relinquishing the position. The job confers status but requires no qualifications beyond a genteel demeanor.[4] On the other hand, to do his job properly, a court reporter has to master the Victorian system of shorthand, which is a Herculean task. So it is honest work involving true accomplishment and a step upward from proctor. As is well known, before becoming a novelist, Dickens was a superior court reporter, celebrated for his shorthand speed.

Finally, David finds his true vocation in writing fiction. It is in this capacity that, like Dickens, he becomes famous.

This period also involves David's marriage to Dora. Chesterton

thinks it is a good marriage for David — not a perfect one, to be sure, but there are no perfect marriages. Chesterton is quite eloquent on this point. Had Dickens allowed Dora to live, David would go on being frustrated, and he and Dora would go on loving each other:

> Most marriages, I think, are happy marriages; but there is no such thing as a contented marriage. The whole pleasure of marriage is that it is a perpetual crisis. David Copperfield and Dora quarreled over the cold mutton; and if they had gone on quarrelling to the end of their lives, they would have gone on loving each other to the end of their lives; it would have been a human marriage. But David Copperfield and Agnes would agree about the cold mutton. And that cold mutton would be very cold. (xi)

That is Chesterton's view, buttressed, no doubt, by his Catholic aversion to any divorce-substitute, but is it Dickens's view? Resorting briefly to external evidence (evidence outside the novel), we know that Dickens was profoundly separated from his own wife. Although divorce was out of the question for most Victorians, Dickens did effect a complete separation from his wife, who, biographers seem to agree, had failed to keep up with him. And this, I have to conclude, is Dora's basic drawback with David. As for internal evidence that Dickens didn't simply tire of Dora, we have the early warning of Aunt Betsey, who refrains from elaborating because she refuses to interfere: "'Ah, Trot!' said my aunt, shaking her head, and smiling gravely, 'blind, blind, blind!'" (477). In retrospect, we realize that this refers not simply to the blindness of David's infatuation with Dora but to his failure to perceive the superiority of Agnes.

Finally, there is Dora's death, the period of mourning that fol-

lows it, and David's marriage to Agnes. At long last, David recognizes that Agnes isn't his sister but his potential bride. This is foreshadowed by Dora's private conference with Agnes before her death. Dora tells Agnes that she could only be happy at the prospect of David marrying Agnes, and no one else. Naturally, Agnes only tells David about this confidence after his proposal. The marriage could still be writer's fatigue on Dickens's part, since the conference occurs late in the novel. But what becomes obvious is that before David wins Dora's hand, it is Agnes who is held up as a preferable bride. This is confirmed by Aunt Betsey's later (and veiled) prediction that David will marry Agnes, which means that it was Agnes she was thinking of when she privately lamented David's choice of Dora. First, Aunt Betsey insists on David traveling to Canterbury by himself, without mentioning her real reason. Next, she extols Agnes's virtues (the virtues that bore Chesterton): "'You will find her,' pursued my aunt, 'as good, as beautiful, as earnest, as disinterested, as she has always been. If I knew higher praise, Trot, I would bestow it on her'" (799).[5] Next, she admits that she has always suspected Agnes of having an "attachment" that makes her reject "A score" of suitors (Ibid.). Adhering to her policy of non-interference, she refuses to explain. But finally, before David's next visit to Canterbury, Aunt Betsey goes a step further, while remaining cryptic:

> "I think Agnes is going to be married."
>
> "God bless her!" said I, cheerfully.
>
> "God bless her!" said my aunt, "and her husband too!" (820)

The point is that David doesn't understand Aunt Betsey's reference: she is predicting that David will see the light and propose to Agnes, who will accept because David is the "attachment" she referred to.

In a word, it was Dickens's plan from the beginning to have

David ultimately marry Agnes. If Dickens's preference amounted to "fatigue," he must have tired while writing the earlier part of the novel, which Chesterton admires. Furthermore, though Agnes isn't as vivid a literary character, there is no reason to think that she would be any less attractive to David than Dora. He has always regarded her as beautiful. Once the scales have fallen from his eyes and he sees her as a potential mate, he becomes devoted to her.

The theme of selfishness: A little reflection tells us that selfishness is a common theme in literature. It is an especially easy way to sort the characters in *David Copperfield*. The worst character (perhaps along with his sister) is probably Mr. Murdstone, who has two semi-conscious goals: the ego gratification that he gets from dominance over another human being and the money and property he can appropriate by marrying a girl weak and inexperienced enough to fall into his trap. We notice that Murdstone doesn't stop with Mrs. Copperfield. Some years later, David observes Murdstone preparing to marry another young woman, and he later hears that this young woman has been reduced to virtual imbecility by the bullying of her husband and his sister. Whether or not the second wife dies, Murdstone has obtained a new object to dominate, and he is now master of more property. It is an intended irony of the novel that Murdstone has gained notoriety as a moral crusader.

Less loathsome than Mr. Murdstone, perhaps, because at least he isn't violent, and he hasn't driven anyone to her death, is Uriah Heep. Uriah is completely dedicated to himself, and he has a toxic effect on many of the people around him. He is described as fatally lower-class and reptilian in his manner and movements. The point, though, is Uriah's malevolent influence on people. Just to take two

examples, first, he drives Mr. Wickfield deeper into alcoholism so that he, Uriah, can take over his law practice; next he repeats to Dr. Strong the unfounded and slanderous reports that his much younger wife, Annie, is carrying on an affair with her cousin.

This whole Strong episode is like a lesson in selfishness. Annie is accused by gossips of adultery because her mother (whom David calls "the old soldier") is always inviting the dashing cousin over to amuse herself. The old soldier exerts a powerful influence on Dr. Strong, always in order to secure comfort, entertainment, or expensive luxuries for herself. She is an instance of unalloyed selfishness. Conversely, Dr. Strong refuses to suspect his wife of anything when he hears Heep's slanders. He only blames himself for creating a situation that has had an ill effect on Annie's reputation. This selflessness on Dr. Strong's part leads to a clear understanding with Annie, and a public demonstration of her innocence. It also involves a humiliating demotion of the old soldier, who can no longer trade on her daughter's connection.

Most of the other characters are just as easy to sort in this way. David's sponsor Mr. Spenlow, for instance, is sly and selfish. He always blames his avaricious policies on his silent partner, Mr. Jorkins, who turns out to be a mere cipher. Mr. Jorkins will say anything Mr. Spenlow wants him to say. In fact, Mr. Spenlow uses this excuse twice with David: when he asks for more money to sponsor David, and when he refuses to refund any part of that payment after David decides his aunt needs the money to soften her apparent bankruptcy.[6]

One of the most vivid examples of selfishness is Steerforth. He already has whatever he wants in material terms, but he is absolutely devoted to himself when it comes to his relations with others. All the time he is charming Mr. Peggotty and Ham, we are given hints that he

is contemptuous of them and has no idea of their true value, which could be called pure selflessness. This is obviously the reason Dickens has Ham die in an attempt to save a fellow seaman in a storm, who turns out to be Steerforth. The scene is too coincidental, really, and slightly mars the credibility of the story. But Dickens's clear intention is to perfect the contrast between Ham's untutored devotion to others and Steerforth's elegant devotion to himself.

In sum, Dickens has developed a moral hierarchy, with Murdstone and his sister at the bottom; Uriah Heep perhaps a centimeter above them; morally shady characters like the greedy but not especially wicked Mr. Spenlow in the middle; and moral exemplars like David's nurse Peggotty, Mr. Peggotty, and Ham at the top.

But how do the foci of Chesterton's remarks fair in this evaluation? Surely, Mr. Micawber has often been selfish and predatory, though no one has really suffered much from the loans he has failed to repay. His final test is when he works for Uriah Heep. Mrs. Micawber fears he is turning evil. But this is out of character, and in fact, in a tour de force on Dickens's part, Mr. Micawber comes out loudly and decisively against Uriah Heep, and it is the evidence he has gathered along with Traddles's calm legal expertise that finally bring Heep down.

There is no denying that Dora is more vividly described than Agnes. Every critic has mentioned this, and it is probably a minor flaw in the novel that Agnes hasn't been brought to life in the way that, for example, Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, a kindred spirit, has. What Chesterton fails to acknowledge, though, is that Agnes serves her purpose in the novel. She represents a female, upper-class version of Mr. Peggotty's selflessness. Like Mr. Peggotty,[7] she is "disinterested,"

to borrow Aunt Betsey's word. David's failure to make Agnes more vivid can be partly explained by the fact that she keeps her main secret from him; she supports his romance and marriage with Dora, and even Dora loves her. David only sees Agnes as more than a sister after Dora's death, and even then he doesn't realize she loves him in a connubial way until she tells him. Chesterton doesn't really ask himself who would be the better wife for a literary success (and possibly a genius like Dickens). As so often, we can only agree with Chesterton if we don't take the story seriously. Dora's death is not an afterthought. It is plausible (as Appendix I indicates), and it is a structurally decent idea. With regard to the theme of selfishness, David moves from the adorable but petted and self-absorbed Dora to the selfless Agnes.[8]

Dickens is not callously suggesting that David should rejoice in Dora's death, but David's marriage to Agnes is his final, and crowning, success.

1 This is one of the book's great scenes. The Murdstones come to claim David, with the purpose of abandoning him again, and Aunt Betsey uses the occasion to give Mr. Murdstone (and Miss Murdstone too, whom she maddens by completely ignoring her until she is finished) a piece of her mind. Here is just a sample of Betsey's powerful statement: "Mr. Murdstone,…you were a tyrant to that simple baby [David's mother], and you broke her heart. She was a loving baby — I know that; I knew it years before you ever saw her — and through the best of her weakness you gave her the wounds she died of. There is the truth of your comfort, however you like it. And you and your instruments [a reference to Miss

Murdstone] may make the most of it."

2 Here is Chesterton's statement: "We should have thought more of David Copperfield (and also of Charles Dickens) if he had faced the possibility of going on till his dying day lending money to Mr. Wilkins Micawber" (viii).

3 While taking David to Salem House for the first time, his young master decides to stop off at a workhouse (a parish-sponsored poorhouse, one of Victorian England's more shameful institutions) to visit his poor mother. In his innocence, David confides this incident to Steerforth. Later, the master and Steerforth have a quarrel in front of the students and the owner, Mr. Treakle. To David's mortification, Steerforth announces to everyone that the master's mother is living in a workhouse. True to character, Mr. Treakle reacts to this taunt not by reprimanding Steerforth but by firing the master, who is a kind young man and pats David, in silent clemency. Only Traddles speaks out against the cruelty of Steerforth's disclosure — an indication to the reader that Traddles is special, but to Steerforth that he is also someone to be despised. This scene is a telling notification of Steerforth's egotism.

4 Steerforth, who seems to know everything, describes the proctor's job this way:

"The proctors employ the advocates. Both get very comfortable fees, and altogether they make a very snug little party. On the whole, I would recommend you to take to Doctors' Commons kindly, David.

They plume themselves on their gentility there, I can tell you, if that's any satisfaction" (325).

5 Aunt Betsey calls David "Trot," short for "Trotwood," because her surname is the given name under which she (along with Mr. Dick) assumed his guardianship. Accordingly, Agnes and her father call David "Trotwood" because they first came to know him after Aunt Betsey had become his guardian.

6 Actually, Aunt Betsey is too unselfish to want the money back — she wants David to pursue his career as a proctor — and David has to ask (vainly) for a refund without informing her.

7 Not everyone agrees that Mr. Peggotty is so disinterested. Edwin M. Eigner provides an impressive summary of critics, beginning with Q. D. Leavis, who distrust the nature of Mr. Peggotty's feeling for Emily. Mrs. Leavis goes so far as to term the devotion "maniacal" (Eigner, 86). This seems to me a good example of Mrs. Leavis's tendency to exaggerate. If we look at the outcome of Mr. Peggotty's mania, Emily is rescued. There is no suggestion of any incestuous attachment. This is just love, and, as David believes, it bears good fruit. How can it be anything but good?

8 Lyn Pykett (112) reminds us that Annie Strong's declaration to her husband includes the phrases "from the first impulse of my undisciplined heart" and, more tellingly, there "can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose." These echo in David's mind, obviously, though he doesn't analyze the resonance,

because of his latent recognition that he has chosen the wrong wife.

Appendix I: Does Dickens execute Dora?

I think it is unfair to say that Dickens just kills Dora off because he lacks the vitality to deal with her, as if Dickens really were David, and he had grown tired of her inability to manage the household or anything else. Leaving aside the question of whether Agnes would be David's ideal bride, Dora's death is quite plausible.

Chesterton was born much later than Dickens, but during much of his lifetime childbearing was still dangerous. Women often died of childbed fever (*puerperal sepsis*). We now know that most of these deaths could have been avoided if doctors and midwives had simply washed their hands and the equipment they used. Nor is this the first case of such a death in Dickens. We see it in the opening scene of the novel written just before this one, *Dombey and Son*. Mrs. Dombey, who has just given birth to Paul Dombey, is dying; Mr. Dombey is too excited about his new son to notice; and only Flora, the psychologically orphaned daughter, reacts appropriately.

Dora is portrayed as a natural risk for such problems. She is fragile like David's mother, who died not too long after the birth and subsequent death of her second son (her first by Mr. Murdstone).

Moreover, in modern parlance we could also say that Dora's genes put her at risk. Her mother had already died, obviously of natural causes, before David met her, and her father, Mr. Spenlow, died suddenly in the prime of life, which was why David was able to marry Dora.

Putting this all together, Dora's death, though far from

inevitable, is well prepared and quite plausible in the story. It is no reverse *deus ex machina*.

Appendix II: Does the transportation serve a legitimate purpose?

Chesterton objects to the transportation of any of the characters. Dickens used transportation again in *Great Expectations*, in which novel, very tellingly, Megwich is sent to Australia as an alternative to prison in England. But that is forced transportation. The emigrants in *David Copperfield* choose to leave on the same ship for Australia and establish themselves there. They include the Micawbers (parents and children), Emily and Mr. Peggotty, and even Mrs. Grummidge, who turns out to have appreciated Mr. Peggotty's utter tolerance of her constant moaning after all. Besides criticizing the general assumption that people will change in the wild colonies, Chesterton thinks all the transportation serves the same purpose as the death of Dora: "Micawber is a nuisance. Dickens the despot condemns him to exile. Dora is a nuisance. Dickens the despot condemns her to death" (ix). Dora's case is treated In Appendix I.

As for Micawber, it seems to me that Chesterton is putting his own kind, paradoxical philosophy above the story. Micawber is hopelessly in debt, and this is a chance to at least catch a breather. Is it inevitable that Micawber will fall into debt again? Perhaps, and to that extent, Dickens has produced a minor blemish, but no more. The transportation is little more than a retrospect. It isn't a major point in the story. The idea of keeping Micawber around because life is enriched by inconvenient people, who make the best friends, is original, but it has little to do with the novel.

On the other hand, I think Chesterton is absurdly Victorian in thinking that transportation cannot solve "the hopeless tragedy of Peggotty" (vii). What is the "tragedy"? Surely not the death of Ham, since that comes after Mr. Peggotty's decision to take Emily to Australia, and David even keeps news of the death from him until sometime after his arrival. Chesterton must be thinking of Emily's loss of virginity. And sure enough: "It is seriously suggested that Peggotty finds peace in Australia. It is really indicated that Emily regains her dignity in Australia" (vi). Perhaps Chesterton's Catholicism makes him so much more Victorian than Dickens. He scoffs at the idea that the loss of virginity out of wedlock, even in anticipation of marriage, could ever be risen above. Surely by now this blurring of theology and psychology seems absurd.

Yes, the loss of virginity would be a stigma in Victorian society if Emily remained in England, where she is known. But it isn't even clear that she did anything unethical beyond declining to marry Ham without informing him directly. And even in this case, she wrote a very contrite letter to her uncle and Ham. She thought Steerforth would marry her. And nobody in Australia need know about it. She has no child. I don't see why under these circumstances Emily cannot regain her dignity (if she has really lost it). And in my own moral world, Mr. Peggotty should be more concerned about the wrong done to Emily than any wrong she did. Since the perpetrator of the wrong, Steerforth, is dead, I see no reason at all why the "tragedy," if that isn't a grandiose word, is "hopeless." In any event, even if we are as Catholic and Victorian as Chesterton, we should regard Australia as a better chance for the Peggottys than England. And contrary to Chesterton's thought that optimism about Australia is an English illusion, Australia has

turned out to be one of the healthiest and most advanced countries in the world.

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