



Title	Inarticulate Fear of Futurity : A Study of Dickens' s David Copperfield
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Citation	大阪大学世界言語研究センター論集. 2011, 5, p. 43-62
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/5686
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Inarticulate Fear of Futurity: A Study of Dickens's *David Copperfield*

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要 旨

未来に対する隠れた恐れ ーディケンズの『デイヴィッド・コパフィールド』の研究ー

作者ディケンズの自伝的要素が多く含まれた、いわゆる教養小説である『デイヴィッド・コパフィールド』は、自分の半生を記録してきた語り手が、妻と共に歩む自分の未来を想像しながら筆を置く、という締めくくり方になっており、自分の「若さ」を恥ずかしく思っていた頃の記述と考え合わせると、人生の過程を「進歩」として肯定的に捉えているように思われる。しかしながら、語り手が明白に言葉で表現していない中に、未来に対して恐れを抱き、人生の流れを「衰退」と認識するような視点が散見される。本稿では、老人たちの描写、中年期における generativity と stagnation の問題、青年の死の場面に焦点を当てて具体的に分析することで、この小説が語り手デイヴィッドの、ひいてはこの小説を執筆時に語り手とほぼ同年代であった作者の「ミッドライフ・クライシス」の表出、という側面を持っていることを論じる。

Keywords : Victorian, life stage, progress/decline

キーワード : ヴィクトリア朝, ライフステージ, 進歩／衰退

1. Introduction

When asked by an acquaintance which of his own books he considered the best, Dickens, about a year before his death, replied “Unquestionably *David Copperfield*” [Ackroyd 1990: 606]. *David Copperfield* (1850) “soon acquired great popularity and fame both in England and abroad,” although its “immediate serial sales were not so high as those of *Dombey and Son*,” which is a preceding novel of his [Wilson 1970: 172]. Critics have never been indifferent to the author’s favorite book, though there have been some severe attacks made on its defects. One early critic blames the author pointing out that “there is a real reason for noting an air of fatigue. . . . There are many

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marks of something weak and shadowy in the end of *David Copperfield*" [Chesterton 1911: 105]. Another regrets that the "purely journalistic intrusions are the more odd as *David Copperfield* is a metaphysical rather than a social novel" [Wilson 1970: 171]. A recent criticism, however, values Dickens's "heightened social consciousness" in the novel [Barr 2007: 56]. Moreover, its significance as "metafiction" is elaborated by a critic, with a focus on "David's authorship" emphasized by other "minor authors in *David Copperfield*" [Sroka 1993: 50].

While this novel is known to be full of Dickens's biographical elements as well as being regarded as the enactment of his efforts to come to terms with his own traumatic experiences as a child, such as his having to work at a blacking warehouse because of his father's imprisonment, there is no doubt that this novel is in the tradition of a *Bildungsroman*, given that it apparently deals with the narrator's growth out of "the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" into a stable and happy matrimonial life with Agnes, one of Dickens's angelic female characters [613].¹ The issue of youthful vulnerability and David's consciousness of his being "particularly young," are repeated in the scenes where he is taken advantage of by his elders at the inns and shops, or is embarrassed at the "shaving-water" which is still not necessary for him [281]. These episodes seem to present the idea of "the life course as a progress," although growing up is accompanied by a series of losses, as when David loses his mother, Emily, and Steerforth [Gullette 1999: 50]. The very last sentence in the novel, which is about the narrator's future, also suggests his positive attitude full of hope for his forthcoming life with Agnes, his wife and guiding angel: "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!" [806].

The choices and arrangements of episodes and characters throughout the novel, however, do not allow readers to count on such notions of futurity as much as the narrator appears to do. That is to say, the various forms and degrees of factors lie in wait in order to shake the belief in a so-called hopeful future, and they also ominously portray the life course as "a decline" [Gullette 1999: 50]. This paper will contextualize and analyze various contradictory notions of progress and decline by focusing on the life stages of old age, midlife and youth, whereby some light on the unnarrated fear of futurity and aging within the novel may be cast.

2. Old Age

Discussing the notions of old age in Dickens's novel can sometimes be rather

1 Citation from Dickens's novels will be referenced with page numbers only.

problematic, because “Victorians were far less committed to chronology when they defined aging than we are today,” and they assumed a person’s oldness merely on the basis of his/her “behavioral infirmity and physical deterioration”; they even had the idea that “women grow old before men” and that “menopause signaled the onset of old age” [Mangum 1999: 98, 99]. On the other hand, this ambiguity allows us to have a freer view about his characters when their ages are not clearly indicated: we can consider they are old only if they “exhibit behavior betraying physical and mental failure” and “look old” [Mangum 1999: 98]. In this section, we will discuss how “the long-held associations between old age and illness, disability, disengagement and decline” are prevalent throughout the whole course of *David Copperfield*, while it ostensibly dwells on the growth of a youth [Featherstone and Hepworth 1995: 31].

If we adopt the argument that age for males “was largely determined by his ability to work,” rather than his physical age, Mr. Wickfield offers an intriguing case for examination [Mangum 1999: 98, 99]. Mr. Wickfield, a lawyer who helps Aunt Betsey to find a new school for her grand-nephew David, is first seen in a portrait as “a gentleman with gray hair (though not by any means an old man)” [210]. Meeting him in person, David finds him “some years older than when he had . . . his picture painted” [210]. As the physical age of this gentleman is never mentioned in the text, we can only guess his age by his appearance and the fact that he has a daughter, Agnes, of around David’s age. Some ten years or so after this first meeting, David, having finished his schooling, visits Mr. Wickfield’s again and is invited by Agnes to give his opinions on her father’s change. David hesitantly points out that “H[h]is hand trembles, his speech is not plain, and his eyes look wild,” and that “when he is least like himself, he is most certain to be wanted on some business. . . and the sense of being unfit for it, or of not having understood it. . . seems to make him so uneasy” [261]. From other references elsewhere to his habitual heavy drinking after losing his wife, we can safely attribute the lawyer’s condition to this state of affairs. The course he is following, however, seems to coincide curiously with the process and features of aging. Mr. Wickfield’s changes are characterized by the above-mentioned “behavioral infirmity and physical deterioration,” and his decreasing ability to do his business is a significant indicator of his senility.

Later, Uriah Heep, a writhing and undulating clerk at Mr. Wickfield’s, confesses to David that his master has been “very imprudent indeed,” and cruelly says, “if any one else had been in his [Uriah’s] place, by this time he would have had Mr. Wickfield. . . under his thumb” [354]. Always professing himself to be “so very [h]umble,” Uriah has secretly contrived to usurp his master’s business. Sometime after this, David is shocked to see Mr. Wickfield, though he has been “prepared for a great change in him”:

It was not that he looked many years older. . . but the thing that struck me most, was, that with the evidences of his native superiority still upon him, he should submit himself to that crawling impersonation of meanness, Uriah Heep. The reversal of the two natures, in their relative positions, Uriah's of power and Mr. Wickfield's of dependence was a sight more painful to me than I can express. [476]

It is again suggested by the narrator that the aforementioned change is caused by alcohol, but the phenomenon described here is the withdrawal of the elder from the front, superseded by the younger: the alternation of generations. Uriah is now "in possession of a new, plaster-smelling office," while Mr. Wickfield's room is "a shadow of its former self—having been divested of variety of conveniences, for the accommodation of the new partner" [526]. Even after Uriah's wrongs are disclosed to expel him from his new position, Mr. Wickfield is described as "a white-haired old man" [769], who employs himself in his garden almost every day instead of resuming his legal business: "he seemed[s] but the shadow of his handsome picture on the wall" [772]. At this point, we might even feel that the author has utilized the habit of drinking to disguise the aging process of a man "pushed to the margins" through his "waning vigor" [Heath 2009: 30].

If Mr. Wickfield's case, as we have witnessed, represents the loss of "ability to maintain mastery" by aging, which is accelerated by his habit of drinking, there is another significant instance of the predicaments of life as experienced by an aged man, namely, Dr. Strong, the schoolmaster at David's second school [Heath 2009: 27]. We can recognize the issues of retirement and substitution by the young repeated in his words: "I am getting lazy, and want ease. I shall relinquish all my young people in another six months, and lead a quieter life . . . My first master will succeed me . . ." [262]. Withdrawal from work, however, is not the chief concern with him. There is a different sort of problem presented by the Doctor; that is, "the May-December marriage between sixty-two-year-old Dr. Strong and his young wife Annie that expresses deep anxiety about an elderly man's competence as a husband" [Heath 2009: 42].

Dr. Strong is one of the few characters in *David Copperfield* who is overtly associated with old age from the occasion of his first appearance. David, when taken to Dr. Strong's school as a new boy, notices the oldness of his master and the place itself: Dr. Strong looks "almost as rusty . . . as the tall iron rails and gates outside the house," and reminds the boy of "a long-forgotten old horse" [215]. The boy's nervousness in this strange place diminishes, however, when he finds "great encouragement" in the

Doctor's smile and "simplicity . . . in his whole manner," which are hidden under his "studious, pondering frost" [217]. He, as a schoolmaster, exemplifies the linkage of "wisdom and scholarship with old age," and is expected to play the positive role of "the sage" [Covey 1991: 61].

On the other hand, this introductory scene connotes a problem, which is developed as the story proceeds. David notices a "very pretty young lady" sitting at work near the Doctor, and naturally supposes she is his daughter, but his supposition soon turns out wrong when his master mentions his "wife's cousin" [216]. The Doctor has asked Mr. Wickfield to find a job for her cousin, the needy and idle Jack Maldon. The conversation between Mr. Wickfield and the Doctor here seems to suggest Mr. Wickfield's insight into the relationship among Dr. Strong, his wife, and Jack Maldon:

'I penetrate your motive, and it makes the thing more difficult.'

'My motive,' returned Doctor Strong, 'is to make some suitable provision for a cousin, and an old playfellow, of Annie's.' . . .

'No motive,' said Mr. Wickfield, 'for meaning abroad, and not at home; for distinctly intending him to be provided for, abroad; and not at home?'

'No', returned the Doctor. [216-217]

Mr. Wickfield conjectures that the Doctor wants to keep Jack Maldon away from his wife, though the Doctor denies the idea completely.

Different from the intuitive Mr. Wickfield, David, still a child at his first meeting with Jack Maldon, just thinks that the youth, who calls Dr. Strong "the old Doctor," is "rather a shallow sort of young gentleman . . . with a handsome face, a rapid utterance and a confident, bold air" [221]. Annie's fainting on the night of Jack's departure to India and her "ashy pale" face "so fixed in its abstraction" on the same night are suggestive enough to the reader, although the narrator evasively says: "Distinctly as I recollect her look, I cannot say of what it was expressive. I cannot even say of what it is expressive to me now, rising again before my older judgment" [233]. Later on, however, the narrator is more distinct in his tone about the relationship between Jack and Annie. He describes that Jack's "languor altogether was [is] quite a wonderful sight; except when he addressed[s] himself to his cousin Annie" [485]. When Jack invites his cousin to go to opera, Annie rejects the invitation, but she is "so much disturbed, that" the narrator wonders, "how even the Doctor, buttering his toast, could be blind to what was [is] so obvious" [485]. Dr. Strong is not only blind but even recommends his wife to go, as he is "ever pleased with what was [is] likely to please his young wife" [485].

Dr. Strong's episode reaches its climax when Uriah bluntly tells "that any one may see that Mr. Maldon, and the lovely and agreeable lady as is doctor Strong's wife, are too sweet on one another" and that "Mr. Maldon made excuses to come back [from India], for nothing else; and that he's always here, for nothing else" [567-568]. Upon hearing this, the Doctor declares, with an "impressive and affecting dignity," that Uriah's words are "aspersions . . . of which she never . . . could have been the object," and goes on to say:

" . . . It is she who should reproach; not I. To save her from misconstruction . . . becomes my duty . . . And when the time comes—may it come soon, if it be His merciful pleasure!—when my death shall release her from constraint, I shall close my eyes upon her honoured face, with unbounded confidence and love; and leave her, with no sorrow then, to happier and brighter days." [569-571]

In these words, we can recognize his mature consideration, profound wisdom and understanding of life, which are all appropriate for a "sage". His young wife later "solemnly declare[s]" that she has never wronged him and tells him how she has honoured him for his "learning and wisdom" [612]. Yet, at the same time, Dr. Strong remains a pitiful aged man, who is forced to admit, despite his merits, certain defects in the "May-December marriage" [Heath 2009: 42]. Apart from the true feeling of his young wife, the husband always has to keep asking himself, only because he is aged, if she is content with him or if people around them can believe that she never regrets their marriage, which is followed by too quiet and inactive a matrimony.

Among the various old characters in *David Copperfield*, Mr. Mell's aged mother might be one of the most threatening, though she speaks the least. David meets her on the day he is sent to Salem House, a boarding school in London. Mr. Mell, a master at the school, comes to meet David at the inn and takes him to "the little house of one of these poor old women" [77]. This is the only occasion the boy sees this old woman, who is kind enough to cook breakfast for the boy, but later David remembers that Mr. Mell and he "little thought . . . what consequences would come of the introduction into those alms-houses" [96]. The "consequences" arise when the severe schoolmaster is absent and the students are unusually lively because of his absence. Losing patience with the noisy students, mild Mr. Mell scolds the boys, striking his desk with a book. Then, Steerforth answers back by calling him "an impudent begger," as the head boy has learned from innocent David that Mr. Mell's mother is in an alms-house. The situation develops for the worse when Mr. Creakle appears to clarify the cause of the noise. Asked by the schoolmaster to explain his rude words towards Mr. Mell, Steerforth

reveals that “his [Mr. Mell’s] mother lives on charity in an alms-house” [100]. The disclosure enrages Mr. Creakle, who fires Mr. Mell immediately, saying “you’ve been in a wrong position altogether, and mistook this for a charity school” [101]. By only being poor and living in an alms-house, Mr. Mell’s mother ruins her son’s career. A similar instance may be found in a later novel *Hard Times*, where Mr. Bounderby’s mother brings her successful son’s fiction of self-made man to nought.²

In contrast to Mr. Bounderby, Mr. Mell neither hides his mother intentionally from the world nor keeps away from her. Still, the episode of Mr. Mell and his mother represents the deplorable fact that “for the vast majority of the people, surviving into old age meant facing financial hardship” [Mangum 1999: 103]. Moreover, while it has been agreed among historians that “the extended family was never the predominant form in the Western world” and that “older relatives were never actually expelled from their families because of modernization, urbanization, or industrialization” [Covey 1991: 107], Dickens was not free from the “Golden Age fantasy” in which “the elderly were lovingly cared for by families” [Mangum 1999: 100].³ The way Mr. Mell, as well as Mr. Bounderby, is wrecked by his mother, who lives away from him, somehow seems to suggest her silent revenge for her loneliness in later life, although she is far from intending harm to her loved son. Mr. Mell’s mother is just an instance of the aged who are “threats or burdens” not only of their children but of the parish [Fallis 1989: 37].

As has been illustrated so far, the aged (including the one who is assumedly aged from his looks and behaviour) in *David Copperfield* present negative rather than positive associations with getting old. Mr. Wickfield is driven out of his position by a younger clerk, Dr. Strong suffers remorse from his marriage with a very young wife, and Mr. Mell’s mother unintentionally causes her sons failure and unhappiness. They reflect, in their problematic loss of abilities and marginalization, an unuttered fear of aging, thereby denying the idea of hopeful futurity.

2 Mr. Bounderby is, unlike poor Mr. Mell, a rich banker and manufacturer, who boasts of his “old poverty” as a boy who “was born in a ditch” and “passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty” [21]. His glory is marred, however, when his mother, in spite of herself, reveals to the world that Mr. Bounderby has paid her off to maintain a legendary aura and grandeur to his life out of “the ditch.” She exposes, when she is blamed and slandered about the abandonment of her son, by stating that Mr. Bounderby has “pensioned me[her] on thirty pound a year. . . only making the condition that I was[she is] to keep down in my[her] own part, and make no boasts about him, and trouble him,” which she has never done “except with looking at him once a year,” without being noticed by him [253]. Due to this disclosure towards the end of the novel, the man who has “built his windy reputation upon lies” is forced to “cut a most ridiculous figure” [254].

3 In *Great Expectations*, as well as in some other novels, the author describes a happy parent called “the Aged,” living in his son’s “Castle” and enjoying the “great nightly ceremony” of gun-fire at nine o’clock [185].

3. Midlife Generativity/Stagnation

Just as the onset of old age is difficult to determine, so-called beginning of midlife is also quite vague. It has been pointed out, however, that there was inequality by gender for the midlife period as well, and that Victorian fiction makes a fine distinction, “specifying a decade’s difference for men and women, with middle age occurring for females in their thirties to late forties and men in their forties and fifties” [Heath 2009: 10]. As midlife corresponds, roughly speaking, with the latter half of the seventh stage in Erikson’s life cycle model, it is the period of “care” and its “psychosocial crisis” takes the form of “generativity vs. stagnation” [Erikson 1997: 73]⁴. In this part of the paper, we are going to focus on middle-aged characters in *David Copperfield*, both with and without children, and prove that it is not only “North American fiction since 1960” that “envision[s] the middle of the life course as a period of perilous parenting” [Gullette 2004: 61, 66].

(1) Inadequate Parents

While many of the families in this novel, including the Copperfields, have only one parent, the Micawber family is one of the rare exceptions. This family, which takes David in as a lodger, consists of the couple and four children (though there is another baby added later on): the father is “a stoutish, middle-aged person” and the mother is described as “a thin and faded lady, not at all young” [152–153]. Considering the fact that their eldest boy is aged around four, Mrs. Micawber could still be in her late twenties or early thirties, but the aforementioned depiction allows us to categorize her into middle age, along with her husband. The problem with the eloquent and optimistic husband is that he is always in “pecuniary difficulties” and is frequently visited by creditors [246]. Instead of working steadily, however, he is always “boastful about his difficulties” and waits “whether anything turns up” [246–247]. He is, at one time, even put into a debtor’s prison, which episode, as well as the characterization of the man himself, is modeled after the author’s father and *his* debts [Ackroyd 1990: 70–71]. Although Mr. Micawber is finally reported to have succeeded in Australia as a magistrate, his life in England consists of a series of debts and bankruptcy, which makes him a defective husband and father.

Mrs. Micawber, on the other hand, is afflicted by the budgetary condition of the family, but does nothing to remonstrate her husband. On the contrary, she believes in her husband’s abilities and talents, which seem to us quite doubtful, and repeatedly declares that she “never will desert Mr Micawber” [166]. Instead of taking positive

4 It is well known that Eric Erikson suggested a life cycle model, dividing human development into eight stages. Each stage is supposed to present psychosocial crisis (syntonic vs. dystonic).

steps to amend her husband's shortcomings, she uncritically follows his principles, puts things in pledge, and complains not about Mr. Micawber but about their difficulties to David, a boy of ten years or so. Neither her useless pride in her own parentage nor her devoted love towards her husband helps to support their children. Mr. and Mrs. Micawber represent parental inaptitude for securing a stable home.

The Micawbers are not the only instance in which the "parents do not provide [the children with] the requisite guidance and support necessary to achieve healthy adulthood" [Heath 2009: 83]. Now, let us turn our eyes to the cases of two mothers (both are widows), who are far from being "true mothers" but rather serve in "devaluing biological mothers": one is Mrs. Steerforth and the other is Mrs. Heep [Ingham 1992: 115].

Mrs. Steerforth greets David for the first time as an "elderly lady, though not very far advanced in years, with a proud carriage and a handsome face," while she is described to be "greatly altered" with "her fine figure. . . far less upright, her handsome face. . . deeply marked, and her hair. . . almost white" when David sees her after some interval [275]. David feels that she is "devoted to her son," and is "able to talk or think about nothing else" [278]. Mrs. Steerforth, as many other "fond" mothers would do, speaks "in praise of him [her son]" with a "lofty" air, and boasts of her son's "high spirits," "superiority," "great capacity" and "merit" [279]. The mother and son have a "strong personal resemblance between them" and their manners are also similar, though what is "haughty or impetuous in him" is "softened by age and sex, in her to a gracious dignity" [401-402]. When Mr. Peggotty visits Mrs. Steerforth to talk about Emily's elopement, she flatly rejects the possibility of her son's marriage with an "uneducated and ignorant" girl "far below him," and frantically bursts out into asserting her love towards her son, asking contemptuously to Mr. Peggotty: "What is your love to mine? What is your separation to ours?" [434-435]. The characteristics of the mother are inherited by her son and have formed his "unyielding, wilful spirit," filled with "misdirected energy" [436]. This is not the only case where an inadequate parent causes ruin to the loved child.

We can find another instance of an "identical mother-son relationship" in the Heeps. Upon visiting their house, David not only finds Mrs. Heep "the dead image of Uriah," but feels they are "very fond of one another" [242-243]. They, in cooperation with each other, skillfully wrest everything they want to know from David, some of which Uriah perhaps comes to utilize in taking over his master's position. Directly contrary to Steerforth's loftiness, the mother and son of this lowly family share the same attitude of "humility," which later turns out to have been shared also by the late Mr. Heep [243]. Their humility, however, do not help the son to climb up the social ladder. Uriah is

finally detected to have forged books and documents, and to have also led his master to ruin, on which occasion, Mrs. Heep cannot but cry out to her son to “B[b]e [h]umble, and make terms,” but Uriah shuts her up and turns a deaf ear to her imploration, although they are still described as “a congenial couple” [692–693]. Mrs. Heep fails in educating her son to be a decent member of society, just as Mrs. Steerforth does. Her dearest son Uriah ends up as a prisoner numbered and called “Twenty Seven,” as a result of “a fraud on the Bank of England” [786].

Not only widowed mothers with a son but a widowed mother with a daughter can expose the insufficiency of parenthood. Annie's mother, Mrs. Markleham, or “the Old Soldier,” who lives with her daughter's couple, requires “a great deal of amusement,” and pretends “in consulting her own inclinations, to be devoting herself to her child” [599]⁵. Actually, this “excellent parent” with “matured frivolity and selfishness” takes advantage of her son-in-law's “desire that Annie should be entertained,” and fulfills the Old Soldier's personal desires, without noticing that her attitude confirms Dr. Strong “in his fear that he was [is] a constraint upon his young wife” [599]. Though the self-centered mother declares that she did not press the marriage on her still extremely young daughter, she admits to her expectation that Dr. Strong would represent “the wisdom and station” and “the means” of the family [229]. The excitement she shows in her report that her son-in-law is “in the act of making his will” and that the document “gives her [Annie] all unconditionally,” reveals that she is one of those mercenary mothers in the marriage market who measures her child's happiness only in terms of financial profitability [604–605].

Thus, a variety of parent-child episodes in *David Copperfield*, as are expressed in the cases of the Micawbers, the Steerforths and the Heeps offer some outstanding examples of midlife experiences of those who suffer “stagnation” rather than “generativity,” though they are not without affection for their children. Their problems suggest the failure of proper inheritance and disturbed change of generation, which darkens the hopeful picture of the future.

(2) Childless Figures

Some Dickensian novels, a critic intuitively designates, reveal “the purpose of disvaluing biological mothers” and “reductions in the value of the mother are . . . brought about by the fact that womanly non-mothers are all potential ‘true’ mothers” [Ingham 1992: 115]. This indication can be extended to male parents too, given that the inadequate parents as discussed above include Mr. Micawber, a father. Contrary to

5 Annie is married to an aged scholar Dr. Strong, and her mother lives with them. The boys at Dr. Strong's school call Mrs. Markleham “the Old Soldier” “on account of her generalship” [227].

such parents who provide inappropriate support and guidance to their children, other middle-aged characters, in the novel, though childless themselves, are seen to display true generativity.

Miss. Betsey Trotwood, an aunt of David's father, is full of generative disposition, in spite of her apparent eccentricity and obsession about keeping donkeys away from her garden. Though her sudden visit before the baby's birth frightens David's mother, the words of Miss. Betsey, who has "a presentiment that it must be a girl," prove her solid resolution about the child:

"... I intend to be her friend. I intend to be her godmother ... There must be no trifling with *her* affections. . . She must be well brought up, and well guarded from reposing any foolish confidences where they are not deserved. I must make that *my* care." [16]

Her strong will to protect the baby from following her own failures in the past suggests her ability to become a suitable parent, despite the fact she leaves the place without a word as soon as she learns that the baby is a boy. However, when David runs away from his stepfather's and goes to her to seek support, she fully displays her guardianship. She not only takes him into her house but formally adopts him, looks for a splendid school and lodging to give him due education, and agrees later to give financial help for him to become a proctor, saying that her "object in life. . . is to provide for your [his] being a good, a sensible, and a happy man" [325]. Miss. Betsey, who, at the time of David's placement, calls herself "an old woman whose prime of life was not so happy," spends her midlife playing the role of a true mother to David [326].

Another instance of true parenthood is found in Mr. Peggotty, who is a fisherman and brother of David's nurse. There is no reference to his exact age in the text, but we might suppose that he lives his midlife as the story proceeds, because he is first introduced to us just as "a hairy man with a very good-natured face," and is then described, after ten years or so, to wear "iron-grey hair" [39, 666]. Although he is single, he has adopted his two deceased brothers' children, Ham and Emily, and lives like a true family, together with his deceased friend's widow, Mrs. Gumidge. The comfort in his ship-shaped house forms a striking contrast to the cold and joyless atmosphere in David's home after his mother's second marriage. The real worth of this man, however, is proved after Emily's elopement. Mr. Peggotty courageously confronts Mrs. Steerforth for the sake of Emily's happiness, though he finds his request for Steerforth's marriage with Emily flatly rejected by the haughty lady, who even humiliates this lowly but good parent. He undauntedly decides to go on a journey to

look for his lost niece, and keeps searching for her for a long time, as he never wavers "in his strong certainty of finding her" [656]. His strong love towards Emily and his determination to "do his own part faithfully, and help himself" in order to regain her certify this single man to be more responsible and adequate as a parent than some other biological parents are [656].

Moreover, two of the most striking childless middle-aged characters in *David Copperfield* are marked for their disabilities: one being mental, and the other physical. Mr. Dick, who is provided for by Miss. Betsey, is "a florid, pleasant-looking gentleman, with a grey head" [183]. Though Miss. Betsey seems to count on him for good advice, David "suspect[s] him of being a little mad" from "a strange kind of watery brightness" in his "grey eyes prominent and large," "in combination with his vacant manner, his submission to my [David's] aunt, and his childish delight when she praised[s] him" [187]. Later, David learns from Miss. Betsey that Mr. Dick's brother was about to send him "away to some private asylum-place" and "shut him up for life," when she offered to take care of him in her house; in her opinion: "He is the most friendly and amenable creature in existence; and as for advice! — But nobody knows what that man's mind is, except myself" [196]. Mr. Dick, though afflicted by unusual mental confusion such as obsessive disturbance by the head of King Charles the First, which somehow intrudes into his mind in writing his own Memorial, is one of Dickens's "grown-up children," who is "allowed to convert mental deficiency into an apparent gift of inspired insight, inaccessible to the fully mature" [Andrews 1994: 78]. A critic acutely points out that the description of his eyes emphasizes the "abnormal, heightened vision" often ascribed to the characters in the tradition of "holy idiots," "who have mental defects but who also have mystical, visionary natures or at least unusual innocence and selflessness" [McKnight 1993: 35, 47]. The pieces of cliché advice he gives, such as "I should wash him" or "I should put him to bed," are most practical and helpful in providing the child David with necessary support, when Miss. Betsey, who should be more intelligent than Mr. Dick, is distracted by surrounding circumstances [186, 191]. He, as an advisor, is indispensable for Miss. Betsey to fulfill the act of a generative parent, and owns, as it were, joint-parenthood with her for David.

If Mr. Dick can be described as being a middle-aged child mentally speaking, then Miss. Mowcher, a hairdresser, may be said to be physically child-like. She is first introduced as "a pursy dwarf, of about forty or forty-five," with some exaggerated depictions of her extreme fatness: "Her chin. . . was so fat that it entirely swallowed up the strings of her bonnet, bow and all. Throat she had none; waist she had none; legs she had none, worth mentioning" [306]. Her personal features, accompanied by her "torrent of words," "rattled away with surprising volubility," certainly seem to place her

among a series of Dickensian comic characters [306, 313]. She is, however, far from being child-like except for her height, though her eyes, one of which is “turned up like a magpie’s” when listening to others, are as peculiar as Mr. Dick’s [308]. Her qualities are apparently closer to those of “wise fools” than to those of “holy idiots,” because “W[w]ise fools. . . do not have visionary abilities, but. . . they have considerable cleverness and wit” [McKnight 1993: 35]. Along with her “Elfin suddenness” when posing questions, she has a way of “twinkling her eyes like an imp of supernatural intelligence,” and she glances at David “shrewdly” “sharply” and “with extravagant slyness” [307, 312–313].

The comic propensity in Miss. Mowcher is so much mitigated at her second appearance that David entertains “a very different opinion of her” [430]. Although she has not been sharp enough to detect Steerforth’s deceit in relation to Emily, she persuades young David into believing the unexpected news she has brought: “Try not to associate bodily defects with mental” [430]. Towards the end of the novel, she is reported to have played a significant part in the arrest of Littimer, Steerforth’s servant who helped Emily’s elopement: Miss. Mowcher has “picked him out with her sharp eye,” despite his “complete disguise” [786]. By keeping her own words, “If ever I [she] can do anything to serve the poor betrayed girl, I [she] will do it faithfully,” she compensates for the folly she was deceived into committing by cunning Littimer [430]. With her serious words and prompt activity, she shows David some truths about life as well as the way to repent and take responsibility for one’s own deeds, which might guide the youth through his own life.

Contrary to the inadequate biological parents treated in the former section, parents of adopted children, Miss. Betsey and Mr. Peggotty, show a lot of responsibility and care as they go about protecting and guiding the children for their happiness. Besides, a middle-aged man of child-like mentality and a middle-aged woman with a child’s stature, notwithstanding their deviation from the norm, represent features requisite for mature grown-ups. All these childless characters at midlife, as we have detected, have the effect of accentuating the queerness and aberration of biological parents, and of foregrounding the issues of generativity and “perilous parenting,” which always threaten this life stage. Middle-aged characters in this novel reflect, thus, the problematic transition from one generation to another, denying the optimistic notions of flourishing futurity.

4. Early Death and Arrested Time

(1) Deceased Parents

Unlike other novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Dombey and Son*, where memorable death scenes of children, Dick, Nell and “the little scholar” Harry,

and Paul Dombey, are described, Dickens does not present a child's death in *David Copperfield*. It is true that David's infant brother dies in the early stages of the story, but the baby is not one of those children whom the "writers gave personalities"; in other words, readers are not "asked to sit by the deathbed, taught how to behave in a last illness, and led to shed tears for that particular child" [Gullette 2004: 64]. The focus in this case is more on David's mother than on the baby himself. We will, from now on, deal with various instances of premature death in *David Copperfield*, and consider how they work.

It has been pointed out that "O[orphan]phans and orphanhood is everywhere in Dickens" [Hochman & Wachs 1999: 11], and *David Copperfield* is no exception. Ham and Emily, whom David meets on his visit to Yarmouth, are both orphans, adopted and provided for by their uncle Mr. Peggotty, who is the brother of David's nurse. Rosa Dartle, a companion of Steerforth's mother, was also orphaned after her father's death, whereupon she goes to live in Steerforth's house. The eponymous protagonist himself becomes an orphan on his tenth birthday, when he is told that his mother has passed away. His mother herself, too, is an orphan, and meets David's father for the first time when she is working as a nursery-governess at some house. If we look at the issue of prevalent orphan figures in the novel from another angle, we may say that these children have been orphaned because their parents die young. We can find more instances of premature death, when we turn our eyes to the fact that this novel exhibits a number of characters with only one parent.

David has been fatherless since birth, as his father died without witnessing his son's birth. Moreover, Steerforth seems to have lost his father when he was still a small child, as he regrets that he has not been well guided, saying "I wish to God I had had a judicious father these last twenty years!" [301] Another boy, Uriah Heep, an employee at Mr. Wickfield's office, lives alone with his mother, who still wears weeds "N[otwithstanding the lapse of time that had[s] occurred since Mr Heep's decease" [242]. It can be surmised that Uriah's father must have passed away quite a while ago, though, unlike Steerforth's father, this boy's father left a clear lesson to guide his son through his life: "Be [h]umble. . . and you'll get on. . . . People like to be above you. . . . Keep yourself down" [531]. The "search-for-a-father-figure" can be found in a female character, too: Annie married Dr. Strong when she was "extremely young," partly according to her mother's opinion that "he will represent your [her] late father" [229].

In addition to various fatherless children, there are also a couple of motherless characters dealt with in this novel. When David is moving to a new school, he sees Agnes Wickfield, a girl of around his age, already playing the role of a "staid" and "discreet" housekeeper, instead of her mother in the portrait[213]. Mr. Spenlow, a

proctor to whom David becomes apprenticed after finishing school, is also left with his daughter Dora. There is no knowing when her mother died, but it must have been an untimely death, because Dora is still young at this point. Dora Spenlow loses her father shortly afterwards and she becomes completely orphaned, though she might be past the age to be called an “orphan.” Again, it is difficult to guarantee that Mr. Spenlow dies before his time, but circumstantial evidence suggests that he is not old yet: he is “light-haired,” not grey; he walks with “hasty footsteps”; what is more, he has quickened the business as “new blood” and has presided over the office, while his “easy-going, incapable” partner Mr. Jorkins is seldom seen around [328, 520]. As ability in work, rather than actual physical age, used to be one of the key factors in deciding the oldness of males in the Victorian Era, we can safely say that Mr. Spenlow’s death is premature.

While some parents, as mentioned above, leave this world before seeing their children grow into full adulthood, there are two major characters who get married but die before gaining enough experience for full wifehood or motherhood: one is Dora, David’s first wife, and the other is Clara, David’s mother. These two young wives have a lot of features in common besides their beautiful “curls” [24, 369], where we might also naturally trace some Oedipal disposition in David, as well as in other fatherless boys in this novel.

The phrase “child-wife” is first mentioned by Dora to refer to herself in a newlywed home. Their matrimonial life is full of troubles from the start, as neither of the couple is familiar with housekeeping. While another young wife, Annie Strong, is seen performing her duties “with great cheerfulness and quickness,” Dora is poor at keeping the account-book, managing their servant or putting the house in order [216]. Dora asks her husband to address her by that name so that he will not expect too much of his inexperienced wife: “When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, ‘it’s only my child-wife!’ When I am very disappointing, say, ‘I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!’” [595]. Shortly before her death, she reflects that she was too young when she got married, not “in years only, but in experience, and thoughts, and everything,” and says that David would get “wearied of his child-wife,” if they go on [705]. It never happens, though; the “child-wife” passes away, without even having a baby, though there is a slight hint of the chance: “I had hoped that lighter hands than mine would help to mold her character. . . . The spirit fluttered for a moment on the threshold of its little prison, and, unconscious of captivity, took wing” [643]. David’s child-wife leaves him maybe at around only twenty.

David’s mother Clara, on the other hand, is addressed as “child” in her conversation with Miss Betsey, who exclaims, “You are a very Baby!” when she sees her deceased

nephew's wife for the first time [14]. This "child" is so upset and bewildered at the unexpected visit of Miss Betsey that she cries and breaks down repeatedly during the interview. Clara admits that her good husband spoiled her, and explains how her husband "was teaching" her about house-keeping and how she kept a "housekeeping-book regularly, and balanced it with Mr Copperfield [her husband] every night" [17]. The account of Clara's married life foreshadows the troubled housekeeping David, her son, is to experience with Dora. This "child-wife," in contrast with Dora, has managed even after her husband's death with the help of her servant Peggotty. The household of the three, Clara, Peggotty and David, gets on happily for a while and Clara, who is certainly a loving mother to David, is expected to grow into full motherhood, supported by another mother-like figure, Peggotty. The peace in the home and in the mother-son relationship is threatened when Clara, "looking unusually pretty," comes home at night, accompanied by "a gentleman with beautiful black hair and whiskers" [26]. This is the moment when David's mother, who "likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty," begins to be separate from her son, though she never intentionally means to do so.

David's instinctive hatred of the gentleman, "such a beautiful colour" the boy sees on his mother's face, and Peggotty's uncommonly severe words, ". . . such a one as this, Mr Copperfield wouldn't have liked" all foretell what is to follow [27]. Clara remarries the gentleman Mr. Murdstone, and starts a completely new life in the old house. Now that Miss. Murdstone, her husband's sister, has come in to help Clara with household duties and asked, or ordered, her to hand over her household keys, the child-wife has to "suffer her authority pass from her" [54]. In addition, she is forced to behave with a different attitude towards her son, though it is not that she is "waning in affection for my [her] precious treasure [David]." [28] Her new husband, who has "had a satisfaction in the thought of marrying an inexperienced and artless person, and forming her character, and infusing into it some amount of that firmness and decision of which it stood [stands] in need," mercilessly sets out to "mould her pliant nature into any form he chose [chooses]" [51, 55]. Clara is prohibited to behave towards her son as she used to do before this marriage. On the occasion of David's lesson at home, "presided over normally by my [his] mother, but really by Mr Murdstone and his sister," Clara is detected giving hints to her son and blamed for it [57]. She cannot even make excuses but just "starts, colours, and smiles faintly"; she "glances submissively at them" without a word, when they show "a movement of impatience" [58-59]. Clara's second marriage not only prohibits her from playing the role of housewife, but deprives her of the chance to grow into full motherhood: she is estranged from her first son against her will, and passes away with her second child, perhaps still in her twenties or early

thirties.

Early death of parents is, in other words, another form of utmost irresponsibility and inadequacy as parents, as discussed in the previous section of this paper. It, thus, allows them to avoid, in a sense, the dread of attaining the status of being the backbone of a home and of witnessing the full growth of their children.

(2) Death of Young Men

The motif of premature death is emphasized when the author makes more youthful characters, who are not even married, suffer death. A relatively short chapter entitled “Tempest” deals with the death of two youths, Ham and Steerforth. These two characters, one of whom is the rejected fiancé of Emily, while the other is the seducer of the same beautiful girl, perish in the sea on the night of a violent storm. Ham, looking at some men clinging to the mast of a wrecked ship, bravely proceeds with the dangerous job of rescuing them, while other people helplessly suppose “no man would be so desperate as to attempt to wade off with a rope, and establish a communication with the shore” [729]. David repeatedly tries to prevent him from performing the too venturesome deed, but all in vain. The valiant youth loses his life in the rough, rolling water.

One of the men clinging to the mast, on the other hand, remains anonymous throughout the chapter. His identity is gradually unfolded to David and the readers through the elaborate manipulation of the author. The man on the schooner is, at first, just described as “one active figure with long curling hair” [728]. And then, the depiction of his red cap, “not like a sailor’s cap, but of a finer colour,” suggests that this person might not be a sailor but a passenger of the ship [730]. At the same time, the young man’s action of waving his cap reminds David, who was distractedly watching the scene on the shore, “of a once dear friend” [730]. Finally, David witnesses the young man’s body “lying with his head upon his arm” as he has “often seen him lie at school” [731]. It is only at the very end of the chapter that we learn that two rivals have died in the same tempest. The irony is that Ham who was deprived of his dear fiancée by Steerforth dies in his efforts to help the very seducer. While Steerforth has looked down on Peggotty’s people and called Ham “lout,” the “lout” is allotted the role of a hero here, who does his best to save the one “twenty times richer and twenty times wiser” [301].

In this scene of early deaths, the author seems to be trying to compensate for David’s biased view of Steerforth by giving Ham, a simple and honest youth, the chance to perform a noble deed as a hero, once and for all. The narrator is so attached to his friend that he has not been able to hate him even after the news of his elopement with Emily has reached him:

I am not afraid to write that I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken. In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. [421-422]

This almost unreasonable adoration of Steerforth is, in a sense, stabilized all the more and sublimed forever by his early death: Steerforth, with his superb talents, rashness, and negligent irresponsibility both for others' lives and for his own, has become the eternal idol and symbol of the narrator's lost youth.

The aforementioned examples are dissimilar from the sentimental child deaths and nostalgia that arise in Dickens's earlier novels, in that there is something more serious and pressing in the death of the youth in *David Copperfield*. While death at an early age is deplorable, it certainly has the benefit of avoiding growth into responsible maturity. The depiction of David's mother's death compactly manifests the fear of aging and urgent need, rather than hope, for arresting or retrograding the stream of time:

In her death she winged her way back to her calm untroubled youth, and cancelled all the rest.

The mother who lay in the grave, was the mother of my infancy; the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed for ever on her bosom. [131]

Thus, recurring scenes of immature death in this novel refuse the idea of progressive development into future.

5. Conclusion

So far, we have discussed how the notion of the lifecourse as "a progress" is called into question throughout *David Copperfield*, while the narrator apparently displays a positive attitude towards facing his future, most typically at the end of the novel. In other words, the dreadful associations of old age, and the heavy responsibility of midlife parenting, which is always in danger of failure, plus the motif of death at an early age, all imply an inarticulate fear of futurity and aging. Interestingly enough, the death of

his cherished friend towards the end of the novel deprives David of the mirror to reflect his looks, as Steerforth is almost the only person to refer to his appearance.⁶ At the close of the novel, the grown-up David, who now writes about his life, looking back after ten years since his second marriage, is supposed to be in his late thirties and approaching forty. He does not have to feel embarrassed at his own youthfulness any more but rather has to face the aging process and moments of decline. The death of Steerforth happens to save David from learning the cruel fact of his own aging from the mouth of his idol.

Although it is, of course, always dangerous to overlap the narrator in a novel with the author, Dickens's words in the preface to the 1850 edition of *David Copperfield* curiously correspond with the narrator's attitude towards future: "Instead of looking back . . . I will look forward . . . with a hopeful glance towards the time when I shall again put forth my two green leaves once a month. . ." [9]. These words, together with the fact that he intentionally chose a narrator of around his own age, seem to suggest, despite their positive tone on the surface, the author's own fear of futurity and aging. The novel about a boy's progress, thus, assumes significance as an exhibition of the "midlife crisis," this being a term that was not yet coined in the Victorian Era.⁷

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6 Steerforth, on the occasion of their reunion after a long interval, assures David that he is "a devilish amiable-looking fellow. . . Not altered in the least" and calls him "a very Daisy. The daisy of the field, at sunrise, is not fresher" [272].

7 "The view of midlife as the beginning of the end, an inevitable slide into deterioration, is now commonly associated with the term 'midlife crisis' first articulated in 1965 by French psychologist Elliott Jaques" [Heath 2009: 2].

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(2010. 12. 16 受理)