REALISM AND FANTASY IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD* \(^1\)

By C. B. COX, M.A., M.Litt.

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

**WHEN** Miss Murdstone first arrives at the Copperfield home, David describes her as "dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, *as if*, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account" (chapter 4). Later at church he tells us: "I see her dark eyes roll round the church when she says 'miserable sinners', *as if* she were calling all the congregation names" (chapter 4) (my italics).

This "*as if*" construction, a popular one with Dickens, is often used as a means of introducing the child's imagination. When David travels with Mr. Omer, Minnie and Joram in the chaise with his mother's coffin, their boisterous jollity astounds him: "I was more afraid of them, *as if* I were cast away among creatures with whom I had no community of nature" (chapter 9) (my italics). In his stimulating book, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, J. Hillis Miller draws attention to this device, and argues that it helps Dickens to present a continuing memory of how he saw things long ago: "The 'as if' admits the fictitious nature of a surrealist view of persons or things. It testifies to the co-presence of Dickens' childish view and his mature, disillusioned view, and points to the persistence of the former as the source of what we think of as the distinctively Dickensian imagination."

In a brilliant essay, "*David Copperfield* as Psychological Fiction", Mark Spilka shows how the child's imagination is reflected not only in the "*as if*" and similar constructions, but also in the dramatic incidents of the story itself. Spilka calls *David Copperfield* a "projective" novel, "in which surface life

---

\(^1\) A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday the 8th of October 1969.

reflects the inner self."\(^1\) As the hero tells his story, his feelings fuse with the outward action, and his selection of events reflects his subjective fantasies. For example, there are obviously Freudian images. After he is told that Murdstone has married his mother, he wanders into the yard: "I very soon started back from there, for the empty dog-kennel was filled up with a great dog—deep-mouthed and black-haired like Him—and he was very angry at the sight of me, and sprang out to get at me" (chapter 3). Similarly in the passage quoted in my first sentence, Miss Murdstone is being transferred by David into a male figure, like the dog an extension of her brother’s dictatorial power. Spilka argues: "in Dickens, outer scenes are real, but are made to seem fantastic through projected feelings; in either case, the effect is of a surface charged with baffling implications. For Dickens, the creation of that surface came naturally, as part of his attempt to master childhood pain. In *Copperfield* he had summoned up the most anguished memories of youth: his wretched job in a blacking warehouse, his rejection by Maria Beadnell, and his earlier defeat within the home."\(^2\) According to Spilka, the great early scenes of the novel achieve their imaginative impact because they are suffused by the subjective fantasy: "The wealth of comic action, the nostalgic tone, the author’s great good humour, have made the novel popular; but like David’s progress, they all relate to childhood anguish and help to ease its pain."\(^3\)

II

In this paper I want to argue that devices such as the "as if" construction, or the mixture of realism and fantasy in surface incident, are not to be explained solely as projections of Dickens’ "childhood anguish". Indeed, the mixture of realism and fantasy is a major characteristic of his style, part of its essential flavour, and deeply involved with his characteristic adult vision of life. In his fiction, fantastic comparisons and events perpetually take on an independent status, a life of their own, with

\(^2\) Ibid. pp. 186-7.
\(^3\) Ibid. p. 196.
disturbing, uncertain relationships with the real world. In *David Copperfield*, linguistic devices such as the "as if" construction introduce us not only to the child David's mind, but also to the Dickensian mode of apprehending reality. The co-presence of multiple views, realistic and fantastic, rational and irrational, comic and pathetic, is a unique feature of Dickens' imagination. His greatness is that he inhabits various kinds of worlds simultaneously, or moves rapidly with lively wit and astonishing virtuosity from one area of experience to another. Nowhere is this extraordinary Dickensian style more successfully employed than in the opening sections of *David Copperfield* up to his arrival at Dr. Strong's school in Canterbury.

A simple, brief example of Dickens' verbal exuberance occurs when David arrives at Salem House: "There could not well be more ink splashed about it, if it had been roofless from its first construction, and the skies had rained, snowed, hailed, and blown ink through the varying seasons of the year" (chapter 5). You might say this description fits in with the atmosphere of Salem House, evoking its cold unfriendliness. But essential to the image is its joyful and rapid movement from realism to fantasy, its touch of surrealism, its containment of irrational violence in a comic context. Dickens' sense of the absurd is as profound as that of Kafka or Beckett; but the absurd is treated as a joke, its power acknowledged but held subservient to Dickens' comic delight in his wit. The sadism of Mr. Creakle is treated throughout in this way. We are left in no doubt about his viciousness, but the horror is both intensified and controlled by the verbal pyrotechnics.

My point is that this method is not just a method of easing childhood pain, but a creative use of language of astonishing power. Hillis Miller has suggested that Dickens has something in common with Micawber, who similarly uses idiosyncratic language to overcome his misfortunes. Just as Micawber assumes a role by which he can spiritualize and escape from his situation, by mere redefinition of what happened, so Dickens plays with words and fancies to control the dark side of his imagination. Micawber is not just a figure of light comedy, for there is perhaps "a secret identity between the linguistic enterprise of Micawber and that of Dickens himself". Dickens' own
comic genius (rather like that of Falstaff) represents a "perpetual transcendence of spirit over concrete reality".¹

The narrator of *David Copperfield* tells us: "I had (and have all my life) observed that conventional phrases are a sort of fire-works, easily let off, and liable to take a great variety of shapes and colours not at all suggested by their original form" (chapter 41). This offers a good explanation of Dickens' use of language, both conventional and unconventional. Words in Dickens tend to become living forces, separate entities, that, once released into print, take off to pursue their own identities. Dickens' use of names has often been commented upon; it is as if he concurred with Mr. Shandy's belief that a man's character is determined by his name. Mr. Murdstone must act like a stoney-hearted murderer. Mrs. Gummidge could never be light-hearted and sprightly; she must remain a "lone lorn creetur". By repetition, such words take on their own definitions, as if each person is his name and his language. There are many other ways in which words in Dickens take on their own identity. Sometimes a mistake in use of words is extended beyond the joke as a means of defining character. Mr. Peggotty tells David "I'm a bacheldore" (chapter 3). The word conjures up, by linguistic association, a memory of the game of "battledore and shuttle-cock". Although we laugh at Mr. Peggotty's error, the word links him with liveliness and movement. A more typical device is the extension of a bizarre comparison. Steerforth provides a simple example of this trick when he says of Miss Dartle: "Clever! She brings everything to a grind-stone, ... and sharpens it, as she has sharpened her own face and figure these years past. She has worn herself away by constant sharpening. She is all edge" (chapter 20). This description, which has associations with her name, Dartle, creates a sense of her conversation, body, face and character. She is all edge. People in Dickens often undergo a process of transubstantiation through such extended fancies. Miss Clarissa and Miss Lavinia (Dora's aunts) "were not unlike birds, altogether; having a sharp, brisk, sudden manner, and a little short, spruce way of

¹ *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, p. 151.
adjusting themselves, like canaries” (chapter 41). The picture is continued later—“the little sisters had a bird-like fondness for picking up seeds and pecking at sugar” (chapter 42); “these little birds hopped out with great dignity” (chapter 41). Dickens’ imagination continually makes strange leaps and connections. Of Mr. Chillip’s wife he writes: “I can just remember connecting [her] in my own thoughts with a pale tortoise-shell cat” (chapter 10). Such sudden fantastic associations crowd and jostle in the novels, continually investing his people with their own unique identity.

A good example of these devices occurs at the very beginning of David Copperfield, when on the second page we are introduced to the old lady who wins David’s birth-caul in the raffle. She only appears on this occasion and is not heard of again. She is rarely mentioned by critics, for she does not fit in easily with psychological Freudian interpretations. Yet she is essential Dickens.

The old lady is described in a kind of mock-heroic language, but as in Pope what is satirized in inappropriate heroic language takes on a peculiar glory of its own. Although we laugh at the old lady from the narrator’s common sense standpoint, her absurdity endows her with a vitality beyond conventional people. She will not succumb to ordinary numerical calculations:

The caul was won, I recollect, by an old lady with a hand-basket, who, very reluctantly, produced from it the stipulated five shillings, all in halfpence, and twopence halfpenny short—as it took an immense time and a great waste of arithmetic, to endeavour without any effect to prove to her. It is a fact which will be long remembered as remarkable down there, that she was never drowned, but died triumphantly in bed, at ninety-two. I have understood that it was, to the last, her proudest boast, that she never had been on the water in her life, except upon a bridge; and that over her tea (to which she was extremely partial) she, to the last, expressed her indignation at the impiety of mariners and others, who had the presumption to go “meandering” about the world. It was in vain to represent to her that some conveniences, tea perhaps included, resulted from this objectionable practice. She always returned, with greater emphasis and with an instinctive knowledge of the strength of her objection, “Let us have no meandering”.

(Chapter 1)

Her whimsical language conquers reality, the reality where sailors are drowned in bringing her tea. Her views are ridiculous,
but the word "meandering", with its music, its perverse inappropriateness, its miming of its own meaning, has vital richness. The language here in extreme comic form reflects Dickens' own method, as well as that of many of his most famous characters. Fantastical language conquers an intransigent reality, turns it into comic absurdity. His eccentrics refuse to submit to a world where words can only function as representative counters for actual events. The old lady, like Dickens, uses words to create her own manageable fiction.

III

Dickens' "manageable fictions" are not just escapes into childish dreams, but convince by their inclusive and comprehensive vision of humanity. This is particularly seen in his creation of character. Even in the descriptions of Miss Murdstone in my first paragraph, we are being shown more than a child's response. His fantasies—that she is calling the congregation names, for example—act as a vivid notation for her real character. In fact with the "as if" construction, here and elsewhere, it is often impossible to know whether the fantasy is an actual memory of what went through the child's mind, or a later interpolation of the adult narrator. This uncertain status of the fantasy is paralleled in the dramatic events, which similarly mix the real and the unreal. David tells us:

Almost the first remarkable thing I observed in Miss Murdstone was, her being constantly haunted by a suspicion that the servants had a man secreted somewhere on the premises. Under the influence of this delusion, she dived into the coal-cellar at the most untimely hours, and scarcely ever opened the door of a dark cupboard without clapping it to again, in the belief that she had got him.

(chapter 4)

How are we supposed to take this incident? Is he deliberately exaggerating, or is this supposed to be true? Some people think figures such as Miss Murdstone are gross distortions; others tell of real people who behave in a similarly odd fashion. Dickens' great eccentrics are in this respect like those of Ben Jonson. They are at the same time both like real people and also quite incredible. By this method Dickens takes over the art of
caricature, and transforms it into greatness. In a most perceptive book, *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance*, Taylor Stoehr draws attention to the influence of nineteenth-century caricature, in *Punch*, for example, on Dickens' grotesques:

To our perception and understanding, Dickens' characters both as he describes them and as they appear in the illustrations for his books—especially those of George Cruikshank, perhaps the greatest of Victorian caricaturists—may seem exaggerated, not at all like humanity as we know it. But for the artists who invent such figures, caricature is character truly seen, not according to conventions of perspective and proportion, but according to active experience and knowledge of people. Thus, for example, Dickens is always recommending to his illustrators that they go and have a look at this or that real person, who is just like Mr. Fang or Mr. Dombey or Podsnap.  

In Victorian caricature, Stoehr suggests, "...somehow realism and fantasy have been clamped together in a single style, without being integrated...". This seems to me a most illuminating description of Dickens' eccentrics. Miss Murdstone is part of the realistic psychological drama in which the Murdstones oppress Mrs. Copperfield; she is also partly an ogre figure out of fairy-tale. In his depiction of her, Dickens carries caricature to an extent that touches on the surreal. Everything she wears or owns appears a living extension of her evil nature:

She brought with her two uncompromising hard black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was.

Such language intermixes violence and the absurd in a typically Dickensian manner. Miss Murdstone is not just a projection of David's psychological fears, but a great artistic creation in her own right.

Many of Dickens' characters are similarly uncertain in status. They are part both of the child's and the adult's world, and this duality is part of a larger comprehensive vision of human nature. Dickens' portrayal of character suggests, in comic form, how little we know about the elusive and mysterious nature of human identity. His good characters tend to be part human, part

---

2 Ibid. p. 276.
divine, part fool, part saint, part rational, part fairy-tale. Betsy Trotwood is first seen through the window by Mrs. Copperfield as the weird lady comes up the garden: “now, instead of ringing the bell, she came and looked in at that identical window, pressing the end of her nose against the glass to that extent that my poor dear mother used to say it became perfectly flat and white in a moment” (chapter 1). As in a dream, the vivid realism of the nose accompanies a sense of mystery, the supernatural. We are not surprised when David tells us at the end of the chapter: “She vanished like a discontented fairy; or like one of those supernatural beings whom it was popularly supposed I was entitled to see; and never came back any more.” She can perform simple acts of human kindness; she is also an exuberant grotesque. The caricature method prevents us from interpreting her as limited to any one dimension.

Peggotty similarly has a variety of roles. She is a caricature—“whenever she made any little exertion after she was dressed, some of the buttons on the back of her gown flew off” (chapter 2). Her arms are so red “I wondered the birds didn’t peck her in preference to apples”. This typically mixes the real and the surreal, bringing together a description of her rich colouring and an image reminiscent of some grotesque fairy tale. But Peggotty is also a supremely physical presence to the child, with a forefinger “roughened by needlework, like a pocket nutmeg grater”. She takes part in obviously real incidents, coming along the passage with a candle to confront the amazing Betsy Trotwood, or after Mrs. Copperfield’s death preparing to leave the house for the last time:

Peggotty was naturally in low spirits at leaving what had been her home so many years, and where the two strong attachments of her life—for my mother and myself—had been formed. She had been walking in the churchyard, too, very early; and she got into the cart, and sat in it with her handkerchief at her eyes. (chapter 10)

This is not sentimental; there is the sad, dignified rhythm of the words: “She had been walking in the churchyard, too, very early”, a kind of music evoked more obviously in some of the Yarmouth scenes. She is comic caricature, real physical body, symbol for the child of maternal comfort, and, in the end, a
woman of dignity suffering the everyday tragedies of this world.

Uriah Heep is often interpreted as a nightmare figure for the ugly side of sex; his desire for Agnes is presented as nauseating and unnatural. He is in some ways the repressed consciousness of David, whose sexual feeling for Agnes is transcended by sentimental spirituality. The association between Uriah and David's unconscious sexual urges is most obvious when Uriah declares his passion for Agnes. David tells us:

I believe I had a delirious idea of seizing the red-hot poker out of the fire, and running him through with it. It went from me with a shock, like a ball fired from a rifle: but the image of Agnes, outraged by so much as a thought of this red-headed animal's, remained in my mind (when I looked at him, sitting all awry as if his mean soul gripped his body), and made me giddy. He seemed to swell and grow before my eyes; the room seemed full of the echoes of his voice; and the strange feeling (to which, perhaps, no one is quite a stranger) that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next, took possession of me. (chapter 25)

Such descriptions do suggest David's disgust and fear of sex, but Uriah is more than this. He is also a creature in his own right, a gargoyle created by vivid repetition and enlargement of certain central images. His cadaverous face and splay feet first present themselves into the novel when David and Betsy arrive in Canterbury. He is red-haired with red-brown eyes, and a long lank skeleton hand. He holds the pony's head "breathing into the pony's nostrils, and immediately covering them with his hand, as if he were putting some spell upon him" (chapter 15). The "as if" links him with some kind of perverse magic. He has barely any eyebrows and no eyelashes. On the first visit to Canterbury he closely observes David:

... it made me uncomfortable to observe that, every now and then, his sleepless eyes would come below the writing, like two red suns, and stealthily stare at me for I dare say a whole minute at a time, during which his pen went, or pretended to go, as cleverly as ever. I made several attempts to get out of their way—such as standing on a chair to look at a map on the other side of the room, and poring over the columns of a Kentish newspaper—but they always attracted me back again; and whenever I looked towards those two red suns, I was sure to find them, either just rising or just setting. (chapter 15)

The two red suns associate him with some non-worldly power, some creature from another planet, perhaps. He has a clammy
hand; as he reads a book, "his lank forefinger followed up every line as he read, and made clammy tracks upon the page (or so I fully believed) like a snail". He is slimy, damp, "like a convulsive fish"; "his damp cold hand felt so like a frog in mine, that I was tempted to drop it and run away". This, together with his writhing body, connects him with a subhuman species. Like Dickens' other gargoyles, he creates his own language, "I'm a very 'umble person", and his possessions, such as his "blue bag lying down and vomiting papers" are appropriately loathsome. Dickens can create things that have never existed before. Uriah is one of these, a brilliant example of caricature combining realism and distortion. He represents the horror of evil, of irrational obscene fantasy, and the purpose of the story is to defeat him, and to make him subject to the secure conventions of the Victorian family. Betsy throws over him the cloak of comic absurdity, reduces him to the controllable world of fiction: "Don't be galvanic, sir," she says, "If you're an eel, sir, conduct yourself like one. . . . I am not going to be serpentined and corkscrewed out of my senses. . . ." (chapter 35).

Objects in Dickens fit in with this caricature world. Sometimes words used for objects bring out their physical reality, their concreteness, the richness of the material world. At other times, objects are alive, in an animistic universe, or symbols, shadowy, of uncertain status, products of subjective fantasy. Dorothy Van Ghent has written a famous essay dealing with this aspect of Dickens' art in her *The English Novel: Form and Function*. In *David Copperfield*, delight in the material world is particularly associated with Peggotty and Yarmouth. There are the three bright shillings Peggotty gives David when he leaves home for school, which she "had evidently polished up with whitening, for my greater delight" (chapter 5). At Yarmouth, David enjoys his snug bedroom, with the looking-glass "nailed against the wall, and framed with oyster-shells", and a nosegay of seaweed in a blue mug on the table (chapter 3). These pictures have a touch of innocence, but mainly tell of a world in which objects can be enjoyed for their own sake, no other.

In contrast, the grave of David's father is presented almost entirely through subjective consciousness:
My father's eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months, when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me, even now, in the reflection that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were—almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes—bolted and locked against it. (chapter 1)

Warm contrasts with cold, bright with dark, home with “alone”. The word “white” emerges from a shadowy remembrance, like some object from another existence.

Landscapes similarly partake of both the real and the subjective. At Salem he remembers “the damp about the house, the green cracked flagstones in the court, an old leaky water-butt, and the discoloured trunks of some of the grim trees which seemed to have dripped more in the rain than other trees, and to have blown less in the sun” (chapter 5). As usual, the description takes off from objective fact into fantasy, the word “grim” giving an animistic supernatural life to the landscape. The process is familiar in Dickens, as at the beginning of *Bleak House*, or in the opening sections of *Great Expectations*, and has often been analysed.

IV

The controlling medium in *David Copperfield* is memory. Events are all seen through the hazy medium of David’s memory, and he continually compares his recollections to dreams. Hillis Miller has pointed out how for David the past is multitudinous, swallowing, engulfing the present, which is thrown into tumult and confusion by these memories. Chapter One is full of these effects. Betsy Trotwood appears beyond the window like some memory returning at a distance to the mind; her talk with Clara continues as shadows darken, and the two people appear to inhabit some strange region outside time. At the end of the chapter, Dickens tells us how Betsy vanishes like a discontented fairy: “Betsy Trotwood Copperfield was for ever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled . . .”.

The novel is set, therefore, in the dream of memory; this
explains why the earlier sections are among Dickens' most successful pieces of writing; for the memory images are particularly appropriate to that mixture of realism and fantasy which is his characteristic mode. *David Copperfield* has relationships with the great tradition of dream literature—*Piers Plowman*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or *The Trial*—in which the characters desert this world for a strange region where all the meanings gather in rich profusion. Often there are real dreams, but at other times he is uncertain whether he is awake or asleep. When he is taken to Mr. Mell’s mother’s house, he falls into a doze:

I dreamed, I thought, that once while he was blowing into this dismal flute, the old woman of the house, who had gone nearer and nearer to him in her ecstatic admiration, leaned over the back of his chair and gave him an affectionate squeeze round the neck, which stopped his playing for a moment. I was in the middle state between sleeping and waking, either then or immediately afterwards; for, as he resumed—it was a real fact that he had stopped playing—I saw and heard the same old woman ask Mrs. Fibbitson if it wasn’t delicious (meaning the flute), to which Mrs. Fibbitson replied, ‘Ay, ay! yes!’ and nodded at the fire: to which, I am persuaded, she gave the credit of the whole performance.

Similar, when, after confessing to his love of Agnes, Uriah spends a night in his rooms, David tells us:

When I awoke, the recollection that Uriah was lying in the next room, sat heavy on me like a waking nightmare; and oppressed me with a leaden dread, as if I had had some meaner quality of a devil for a lodger.

The poker got into my dozing thoughts besides, and wouldn’t come out. I thought, between sleeping and waking, that it was still red hot, and I had snatched it out of the fire, and run him through the body. I was so haunted at last by the idea, though I knew there was nothing in it, that I stole into the next room to look at him. There I saw him, lying on his back, with his legs extending to I don’t know where, gurglings taking place in his throat, stoppages in his nose, and his mouth open like a post-office. He was so much worse in reality than in my distempered fancy, that afterwards I was attracted to him in very repulsion, and could not help wandering in and out every half-hour or so, and taking another look at him. Still, the long, long night seemed heavy and hopeless as ever, and no promise of day was in the murky sky.

This mixture of dreaming and waking is a characteristic narrative mode. Dream references abound. After Betsy has told him she has lost her money: “As to sleep, I had dreams of poverty in all sorts of shapes, but I seemed to dream without the previous ceremony of going to sleep” (chapter 35). Or at the
beginning of chapter 43: "Let me stand aside, to see the phantoms of those days go by me, accompanying the shadow of myself, in dim procession." In the memory world, the shadows live for ever. Nostalgia becomes a mode of vision. After his mother’s funeral he writes: "All this, I say, is yesterday’s event. Events of later date have floated from me to the shore where all forgotten things will reappear, but this stands like a high rock in the ocean" (chapter 9).

Although *David Copperfield* is a comic book, it is suffused with nostalgia. This is not mere sentimentalism, but part of a profound feeling of paradise lost, of man living as alien in a corrupted universe. In *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot writes:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

In *David Copperfield* there is often a sense of roads not taken and doors not opened. George H. Ford has pointed out that the novel is full of orphans—David, Emily, Traddles, the Orfing who is attached to the Micawbers, Mrs. Copperfield, Martha Endell, and Rosa Dartle; also half-orphans—Steerforth, Uriah, Annie Strong, Agnes, Dora.¹ The world of normal family relationships is non-existent, and search for the lost father and mother is a constant theme. Mr. Peggotty is the ideal father-figure, and David marries Dora partly in pursuit of a mother substitute.

But Mr. Peggotty is associated with Yarmouth, and this shows how the orphan theme is transcended in the novel. The nostalgia is not just a sentimental Dickensian longing for family security, but grows into one of man’s great eternal statements of the lost innocence. In the second chapter, David recalls his early childhood:

And now I see the outside of our house, with the latticed bedroom windows standing open to let in the sweet-smelling air, and the ragged old rooks’-nests still dangling in the elm-trees at the bottom of the front garden. Now I am in the garden at the back, beyond the yard where the empty pigeon-house and dog-kennel are—a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it, with a high fence,

and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden, and where my mother gathers some in a basket, while I stand by, bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved. A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour.

Graham Greene has praised Dickens' secret prose: "the delicate and exact poetic cadences, the music of memory, that so influenced Proust". These cadences appear most wonderfully in the scenes at Yarmouth:

I never hear the name, or read the name, of Yarmouth, but I am reminded of a certain Sunday morning on the beach, the bells ringing for church, little Em'ly leaning on my shoulder, Ham lazily dropping stones into the water, and the sun, away at sea, just breaking through the heavy mist, and showing us the ships, like their own shadows. (chapter 3)

The images hover in the past, in the memory. "Away at sea", with its nostalgic rhythm, suggests distance, absence, beauty and light afar off, among shadows. The ships and their shadows are confused together. Rhythm and image link with the orphan theme, with the picture of the Sunday bells and the lost innocence of Emily. In "away at sea" we touch upon a region of light and shadow just beyond the reach of everyday consciousness. He says later: "It seems to me at this hour, that I have never seen such sunlight as on those bright April afternoons; that I have never seen such a sunny little figure as I used to see, sitting in the doorway of the old boat; that I have never beheld such sky, such water, such glorified ships sailing away into golden air" (chapter 10). The paradise exists only in retrospect, unreclaimable.

In the storm at Yarmouth scene, all these effects gather together. The event has overshadowed all his narrative:

I now approach an event in my life, so indelible, so awful, so bound by an infinite variety of ties to all that has preceded it, in these pages, that, from the beginning of my narrative, I have seen it growing larger and larger as I advanced, like a great tower in a plain, and throwing its fore-cast shadow even on the incidents of my childish days.

For years after it occurred, I dreamed of it often. (chapter 55)

As usual, waking and dreaming are intermixed. As he tries to

1 Graham Greene, "The Young Dickens" in The Dickens Critics, pp. 245-6.
rest at the inn, his actual dream foreshadows the next day’s events:

There was a dark gloom in my solitary chamber, when I at length returned to it; but I was tired now, and, getting into bed again, fell—off a tower and down a precipice—into the depths of sleep. I have an impression that for a long time, though I dreamed of being elsewhere and in a variety of scenes, it was always blowing in my dream. At length, I lost that feeble hold upon reality, and was engaged with two dear friends, but who they were I don’t know, at the siege of some town in a roar of cannonading.

As the scene ends, with Steerforth dead on the beach, David again recalls the past: “where she and I had looked for shells, two children.”

Tolstoy thought the storm at Yarmouth one of the greatest scenes in literature. It combines an agonizing realism with the dream/memory effects of the narration. And out of this turbulence comes the meaning of the memories, a kind of moral solution as Ham dies in trying to save Steerforth. Here is the final reconciliation of the conflicting areas of experience that interplay throughout the novel. The strange “as if” world can be menacing and frightening, but in the storm at Yarmouth turns out to be fundamentally moral. A benign providence imposes its unifying presence on the novel, a presence ultimately and sentimentally associated with Agnes.

A. O. J. Cockshut has written that the novel “continually evades the consequences of its own assumptions,” and, like many readers, dislikes its escapist quality. There is some truth in this. As elsewhere Dickens escapes from conflict into diminutive worlds, and shows this in his liking for the word “little”. Little Emily is an essential part of the Yarmouth paradise. Betsy’s house at Dover is little and white, like a secure fairy retreat in a child’s story. When David discovers the attraction of London, he talks of coal heavers dancing in quaint retreats by a little public house. Dora herself is “rather diminutive altogether”, with a little voice. Although Dickens treats David’s affection for little Dora with some irony, the critical attitude is withdrawn completely from his relation with Agnes. But to

over-emphasize this is to misinterpret the concept of "security" which is at the centre of Dickens' art in David Copperfield. The novel is not just a realistic account of childhood, closely related to Dickens' personal experiences. It is a fiction, a deliberate re-ordering of experience through language in the search for meaning; as a work of art it is a representative Victorian creation, one of the great fictions by which the age attempted to define itself.

As the narrator begins his story, he is alive and well, and there is no danger that he will not survive. In the opening paragraphs the easy semi-jocular tone with which he comments on superstitions invites us to join him in his comfortable self-assurance. There is no question here of a point of view novel in which the narrator turns out to be inadequate or corrupt. Nor are we expected, as in many twentieth-century writers, to think of the artist as exceptional, as offering insights beyond the common range. The narrator of David Copperfield is at home with his readers, comfortable, self-possessed, at ease, and the retrospective mode helps him to create this relationship. Dickens' fiction makes reality acceptable to the average man. It is a bourgeois form, with bourgeois virtues, and these are by no means as superficial as some modern critics like to think. There is strong emphasis on the value of work and honest industry. There is a profound respect for the domestic virtues, for order and peace, for the family affections. The Peggottys, Ham and Betsy live more happily and fully because they are virtuous, in contrast to the lower reptilian life of a Uriah Heep. This simple moral realism is at the centre of Dickens' art.

And so fiction is the servant of this ideal security, a means of taming and controlling the irrational and the violent in favour of common feelings, common sense assumptions. The novel is a conquest over experience, a demonstration through art of the mind restoring sanity, order, security, on the intractable absurd by treating it as joke. Just as the Victorians tried to conquer and civilize an Empire, tried through science and in their museums to impose order on matter, to reduce the extraordinary to the bourgeois, so Dickens found a form for the age. He created a great necessary fiction for the sanity of ordinary people. At its centre, as throughout his work, is the home. Yarmouth is the ideal
home, the security for which children and adults long. And so, through the "as if" and similar constructions, the irrational is controlled.

As David travels on the road to Dover, to the safety and order of Betsy Trotwood's house, where, in the person of Mr. Dick, even madness is tamed and benign, the events gather in all the major themes of the novel. Typical is his visit to the pawnbroker's shop, with its "trays full of so many old rusty keys of so many sizes that they seemed various enough to open all the doors in the world" (chapter 13). From this magical den rushes out an ugly old man, with trembling hands, which were like the claws of a great bird, shouting "goroo". He is a creature of the "as if" world, and the purpose of the narrative is to control him, to create a security which he cannot disturb. In contrast we have the safety of home, the domestic values, not epic grandeur, but the framework of morality in which the average man works out his salvation.