

Study Guide: Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850)

I.) Ultra-condensed summary of the novel

(<http://www.rinkworks.com/bookaminute/b/dickens.copperfield.shtml>)

David Copperfield

Woe is me. My life is nought but hardships.

Agnes Wickfield

Survive. I love you, David Copperfield.

David Copperfield

Thank you. I love Dora Spenlow.

Agnes Wickfield

I still love you, David Copperfield.

David Copperfield

I love you, Agnes Wickfield.

THE END

II.) Reading the Novel

“Is it [= *Copperfield*] simple, or primarily comic, a book for children almost, a book which displays the simplicities or complacencies of feeling of the English middle class? Or is it a sceptical or suspicious text, unmasking Victorian ideology, especially in such areas as class, or sexuality, or in the ideology of work? Does it look back nostalgically to a past moment, as autobiography tends to do? Or is the novel modern, a text looking forward to Freud, and of the same moment as Marx?”

Jeremy Tambling, “Introduction”, in: J. Tambling (ed.), *David Copperfield*, London: Penguin 2004, p. xii-xiii.

The following are a few pointers to help us through discussion of *Copperfield*:

- (Fictional) **Autobiography and Memory**
(→ memory and imagination; staging of memory, trauma etc.)
- **Childhood – Adulthood**
(→ depiction / myths of childhood, childlike figures and their evaluation etc.)
- **Class**
(→ e.g. portrayal of working classes; social mobility; class consciousness?)
- **Gender**
(→ notions of femininity / masculinity; gendering of public / private sphere, role of ‘good housekeeping’ etc.)
- **Leitmotif: ‘disciplining the undisciplined heart’**
(→ Meaning? Which of the characters in the novel have managed to ‘discipline their hearts’? Intersection with class and gender? Evaluation?)

III.) Tasks and Study Questions:

Please read chapters I – XVII (p. 13-280).

1. Think about the narrative situation in the novel: how does David’s perspective as an adult narrator shape the portrayal of his childhood and of different characters? Examples?
2.
 - a. Choose a topic you would like to discuss with regard to *Copperfield* in the next session. (You may either choose a topic from the above list or add a further topic to this list.)
 - b. Identify two key passages in the novel which have a direct bearing on the topic you have chosen. Briefly outline (4-5 sentences) the importance of these passages for your topic.
 - c. Do some exploring on the Victorian Web: <http://scholars.nus.edu.sg/victorian/index.html> Choose at least one link which you found helpful to your understanding of *Copperfield* and very briefly explain why.

Please send your comments regarding the tasks **2.b** and **2.c** to me via e-mail (sbutter@rumms.uni-mannheim.de) by **Sunday (13th Sept.) 6 p.m.** so that I can upload them on DOTLrn.