

The Semiotics of Ribbons

“The old unhappy loss or want of something”
in *David Copperfield*

A writer who sets out to tell the story of his own life, albeit in a fictionalised form, as Charles Dickens did when he decided to rid himself of the “agony of his soul” that had depressed him for so many years, might be expected to follow a pre-conceived and essentially unalterable plan; and *David Copperfield*, the Victorian *bildungsroman* per se, does indeed proceed straightforwardly, when compared to Dickens’s late multi-part novels. After all, the plot, encompassing the formative years, moves steadily along the decisive and memorable events in David Copperfield’s career, whose status as the major figure is hardly questioned at any point in the tale, despite the narrator’s initial uncertainty whether “that station will [not] be held by anybody else” (DC, ch. I, p. 1). And yet, contrary to these paradigmatic factors, the structure of the novel is anything but clear-cut. *David Copperfield* is a centralised and yet a complex novel. Its complexity is, however, not the result of a combination of various strands of action; it derives mainly from a specific narrative pattern.

David Copperfield constitutes Dickens’s first attempt to write a quasi-autobiographical novel and is conceived as an emotionally charged record of past experiences which have their bearing on the present. For this reason reference is alternatively made to two angles of vision, respectively recalling and shaping the stream of memories from which the tale is supposed to arise. Affectively reviving past impressions, the autodiegetic narrator seeks to enter the mind of his former self again to comprehend the impact of former events. At the same time, the experiencing self of the child or young adult is continually checked by the narrating self of the middle-aged author, who has evidently gained considerable craftsmanship from the writing of several books before he commences his narration: “In fulfilment of the compact I have made with myself, to reflect

my mind on this paper, I again examine it, closely, and bring its secrets to the light" (DC, ch. 48, p. 594f.).¹ This mode of narration must needs occasion inconsistencies and conflicting standards of judgement, since the narratorial actual world and the possible world of young David are not always in agreement. Conversely, it often proves difficult to differentiate between the two centres of consciousness; in fact there are numerous instances where the immediacy of the recollection blends imperceptibly with the detached judgement of the second perspective. When the narrator describes an embrace between his step-father and his mother, commenting "I knew as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he chose, as I know, now, that he did it" (DC, ch. 4, p. 43), the two Davids are still kept apart though they may agree in opinion. Conversely, the boy's first encounter with a newly introduced aggressive dog which is emotionally identified with the feared step-father – "deep-mouthed and black-haired like Him" (DC, ch. 3, p. 37) – might as well have been recorded by the frightened child as by the highly imaginative writer. The animal, incidentally, is never mentioned again.

In many cases though, *Copperfield* the craftsman comes close to demonstrating his ultimate command of the narrating process. Such is the case in the penultimate chapter of the novel where the homely figure of Daniel Peggotty is brought in once more to clarify some points that would otherwise not have been accounted for. The explanation offered for the unexpected visit candidly concedes its technical function: "There is yet an incident conspicuous in my memory, on which it often rests with delight, and without which one thread in the web I have spun, would have a ravelled end" (DC, ch. 63, p. 741). As we soon learn, the old man has to brave the taxing voyage from Australia to England to tie up not one, but several strands of action which otherwise might have remained loose and inconclusive. The following analysis will concentrate on another thread in *David Copperfield*, which is closely related to the main plot of the novel. The main function of this strand is of a thematic kind. The marital affairs of Doctor Strong and his young wife Annie are an important component of the complex issue of individual development within a wide range of human relationships, which is moulded into a moral pattern as the narrative advances. Starting from a position of uncertainty and doubt, the hero is set to gain maturity, a sense of security and responsibility.

It can hardly escape the attention of a more perceptive reader of the novel that *David Copperfield*, Dickens's favourite and possibly his happiest

creation, describes a variety of highly satisfactory relationships between individuals of different age groups and gender but hardly a complete family whose coherence might seem rooted in solid foundations.² The notable exception, the bizarre but evidently well-matched Micawbers and their promising offspring, might rather be conceived, in this respect, as a parody of the traditional family idyll so cherished in sentimental novels than as a model of a functioning social unit. And yet the book ends within the sphere of a typical Victorian family, evidently much appreciated by Daniel Peggotty, who has conversely never deplored his own celibate status. This is all the more striking as all major figures in the novel have been reared by single parents or guardians only. Up to the end, marriage proves of little consequence, whereas the companionship of Betsey Trotwood and Mr Dick, Daniel Peggotty and Mrs Gummidge, the two Misses Spenlow, and even the baleful partnerships between Murdstone and his sister or Uriah Heep and his mother remain unaltered. The close affinity between Daniel Peggotty and his niece Emily is even extolled in terms which, quoted out of context, might seem to express the apotheosis of romantic love: "Surrounded by the rosy light, and standing high upon the deck, apart together, she clinging to him, and he holding her, they solemnly passed away" (DC, ch. 57, p. 695).

Unusual relationships rather than happy marriages are encountered by young David as he grows up. His mother's second marriage proves as unhappy as the reader has been given to expect, and she soon dies leaving her son entirely unprovided for. In fact, the unwanted child is deliberately neglected. Murdstone soon dismisses Daniel Peggotty's sister Clara, who has been a faithful servant to the Copperfields, which prompts her to attach herself to the honest if uninspiring carrier Barkis. We receive a detailed description of their wedding, as it impresses little David considerably. The narrator's comment includes a brief reflection that might pass unheeded if it did not prove to have some bearing on the progress of the narrative: "I have often thought, since, what an odd, innocent, out-of-the-way kind of wedding it must have been!" (DC, ch. 10, p. 126). The little country wedding, which is conducted without much ceremony, might indeed be defined as uncommon or even quaint. That it should be remembered as free from taint by the thoughtful narrator can only imply a critical attitude towards marriage in general; the disillusioned view, in fact, which the many ill-fated alliances in the novel would seem to warrant. This particular marriage, though undoubtedly determined by

convenience rather than by affection, is allowed to run its course as quietly as it has commenced.³ When Barkis's death puts an early end to it, the widow can resign herself to the certainty of having done her duty to the departed, who in turn has amply fulfilled his material obligations to her. Well-established and entirely independent, Peggotty can now bestow her assistance where her affection lies, thus once more entering into a function that is so essential to the Dickens world.

Considerations of convenience and a sense of responsibility are the basic elements of another marriage, that claims far more of the hero's attention than Clara Peggotty's intermittent attachment. Once again we receive descriptions that are to a considerable extent determined by the two-fold role of the narrator. On entering the school of the venerable Doctor Strong in Canterbury, little David makes the acquaintance of his pretty wife Annie, whom he first regards as his daughter or granddaughter. He is soon to realise that the discrepancy in age is not the only difference between the "good old doctor and the young wife" (DC, number plans, p. 761). To the mind of the child there is something stiff and rusty about the schoolmaster. The narrator vividly recalls the tempting peaches in his garden, but it is the hard leaves of two aloes that he will for ever associate with Strong's retired way of life.⁴ While the bumbling, lacklustre scholar is too distracted to heed his partner, Annie is openly courted by her cousin and childhood sweetheart Jack Maldon, a thoughtless idler who unashamedly exploits the old man's kindness. This is the sum of a characterisation that we do not owe to the hindsight of the narrating self, but to the observant child, who is in this respect evidently guided by the distinct disapproval of the lawyer Wickfield. To be sure, the impressionable boy's judgement is anything but settled in this as in other cases. When David learns of Maldon's appointment in India, which Strong has procured for him, he feels inclined to associate him with the marvels of the *Arabian Nights* – to the adult narrator's obvious amusement. Yet even *Copperfield* the novelist remains somewhat perplexed about the situation in Strong's house.

The ambivalent perspective of the narration gains a particular relevance when the incidents accompanying Maldon's eventual departure are mediated. Annie seems much affected by the separation, as the reader is left to infer, while the child is apparently unable to draw any distinct conclusion from his observations. Later David notices a cherry-colored article in Jack's hand without identifying it as the ribbon which is missing

from Annie's dress. Even her fainting fit is registered without further comment, as not even the adult onlookers seem inclined to draw the logical conclusion from the incident. So far every circumstance has been reported as it struck the naive observer. Yet in relating the final part of the episode, the narrator intervenes to add a momentous comment. Returning to the house after the guests have left, David inadvertently encounters Annie in a supplicant position, looking up to the self-absorbed old man with a strange, urgent expression which even David Copperfield the writer cannot explain from his vantage point in time:

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 judgement. Penitence, humiliation, shame, pride, love, and trustfulness – I see them all; and in them all, I see that horror of I don't know what. (DC, ch. 16, p. 210f.)

The scene is doubtless of some consequence as the narrator takes pains to point out in a concluding statement: "It made a great impression on me, and I remembered it a long time afterwards; as I shall have occasion to narrate when the time comes." The assertion may have been introduced as a marker to keep the reader's interest aroused and to link the episode with subsequent passages in which the relationship of the Stronges will be further developed. At the same time there can be little doubt that the struggling emotions on Annie's face would have admitted of various sequels. The theme of seduction and betrayal, whether enacted by the uncaring Steerforth or the scheming Murdstone, pervades the narrative in many ways; and the expression on her face offers an unmistakable analogy to Little Em'ly's similarly unforgettable look towards the sea, betokening her eventual tragedy. As the narrator, who is far more forthcoming in that context, asserts with considerable emphasis (cf. DC, ch. 3). There can be little doubt that Emily is destined to fall, whereas Annie's fate is yet uncertain and will remain so for quite a while.

Whenever the narrative returns to Doctor Strong and his circle, Annie's despairing look is pointedly recalled, giving rise to further speculation as the teller proceeds seemingly without hindsight. On another occasion the now grown-up David cannot fail to notice how the lawyer Wickfield tries to shield his daughter Agnes from the influence of Annie, and begins to draw a more definite conclusion from the earlier observation:

And now, I must confess, the recollection of what I had seen on that night when Mr Maldon went away, first began to return upon me with a meaning it had never had,

and to trouble me. The innocent beauty of her face was not as innocent to me as it had been; I mistrusted the natural grace and charm of her manner; and when I looked at Agnes by her side, and thought how good and true Agnes was, suspicion arose within me that it was an ill-assorted friendship. (DC, ch. 19, p. 240)

A close analysis of the text might indicate that the narrator would wish to distance himself from the experiencing self at this point. He has to admit that doubts rose in him concerning Mrs Strong's conduct and, more pertinently, that he did construe "a meaning it had never had" in recollecting the earlier impression. This would go some way to establish her innocence in the face of false suspicions; if it was uttered with greater conviction. After all, nothing was said about Annie on the earlier occasion that might have excluded the significance that is here attributed to her strange behaviour. In any case, it is young David's moral stature that has begun to concern the narrating self. The following comment leaves little doubt that Copperfield is now passing through a phase where his innermost self tends to project feelings of shame and revulsion onto outside figures that have aroused his interest:

I cannot say what an impression this made upon me, or how impossible I found it, when I thought of her afterwards, to separate her from this look, and remember her face in its innocent loveliness again. It haunted me when I got home. I seemed to have left the Doctor's roof with a dark cloud lowering on it. The reverence that I had for his grey head, was mingled with commiseration for his faith in those who were treacherous to him, and with resentment against those who injured him. The impending shadow of a great affliction, and a great disgrace that had no distinct form in it yet, fell like a stain upon the quiet place where I had worked and played as a boy, and did it a cruel wrong. I had no pleasure in thinking, any more, of the grave old broad-leaved aloe-trees which remained shut up in themselves a hundred years together, and of the trim smooth grass-plot, and the stone urns, and the Doctor's walk, and the congenial sound of the Cathedral bell hovering above them all. It was as if the tranquil sanctuary of my boyhood had been sacked before my face, and its peace and honour given to the winds. (DC, ch 19, p. 241)

Though these dark clouds may have been raised by Wickfield's conduct towards Annie, David's misgivings ultimately spring from his own selfrighteousness, and it is he who "stains" his formerly innocent state and discredits his own sheltered upbringing. From now on the marital affairs of Doctor Strong and his wife function as a component in the moral development of the protagonist. Only when his maturity has been achieved can the mystery be resolved, as it eventually will be, in a true Dickensian manner.

When David visits the Strongs again they have indeed forsaken the old sanctuary for a smaller place, conveniently located on the outskirts of London, though without any visible change in their lifestyle. Jack Maldon has returned from India and once again interferes in their domesticity. Lacking the charm which idlers often hold in Dickens's novels, Maldon anticipates the characters of the parasitical Tom Gradgrind and the philandering James Harthouse in *Hard Times* (1854). David forms a decidedly unfavourable impression of him now, possibly because he himself is engaged in various forms of employment at this stage and seriously contemplating marriage. Once more the memory of Annie's face arises in his mind, putting some constraint on his behaviour towards her, but he is ready to judge her less censoriously, or at least inclined to take a more sympathetic view of her situation. "She did not look very happy, I thought, but it was a good face, or a very false one" (DC, ch. 36, p. 449). David's wavering attitude is confirmed in a discursive passage, which Dickens omitted from the text, though possibly for technical reasons. Remembering the tension between Annie and himself, the narrator is retrospectively inclined to accept responsibility for the embarrassment: "But I was uneasy myself, in the old suspicious feeling which the sight of her revived within me, and I don't know how much of the constraint between us may have been on my side" (DC, ch. 36, p. 447).

Critics of the novel have expressed the opinion that the villainous Uriah Heep might be regarded as an *alter ego* onto which David projects his own repressed desires. It is not by chance that it should be left to him to articulate serious doubts about Mrs Strong's marital conduct. As always with Heep, there are very practical reasons behind his obtrusiveness. He wishes to alienate the lawyer Wickfield and Agnes from their genteel friends and thus tighten his hold on them. That he should try to implicate David in his intrigue may be seen as further proof of Uriah's affinity with the hero. His uncanny awareness of the other's misgivings hardly admits of a rational explanation. In the event, Heep fails to shake the Doctor's trust in his young wife; but the matter does not rest here. Though the accusations are never forthcoming in her presence, Annie intuitively reacts to the suspicions, as the "memorable face" (DC, ch. 42, p. 531) discloses. Strong cannot doubt his wife's loyalty, but now at last begins to question his marriage. Conversely, the Doctor's firm refusal to allow any doubt in his wife has to some extent calmed David's apprehension. So much so that he even permits his own wife, Dora, to accompany

Mrs Strong to the theatre. "The time had been, when I should have been uneasy in her going; but reflection on what had passed that former night in the Doctor's study, had made a change in my mistrust" (DC, ch. 45, p. 556). The husband's demonstrative confidence in his young wife weighs more than any outward appearances that might seem to contradict it. Or is it that David is unconsciously trying to dissociate himself from Uriah Heep's line of thought?

This is the point where a Victorian novelist might have let the episode come to an end. Not so Charles Dickens, who seldom missed the opportunity to resolve unsettled issues through a dramatic confrontation. In addition, the complex nature of the estrangement between the Strongs, evidently much affected by delicacy of feeling, required the intervention of an outside agent, which in turn would have suggested a scenic presentation. As the dramatis personae of the novel do not include an authoritative father figure, the role of this external arbitrator had to be realised in a different way. In the absence of a more detailed draft, it would be futile to conjecture whether Dickens had always intended to let the mentally disordered Mr Dick serve as a catalyst or whether the opportunity of confirming Betsey Trotwood's avowed trust in his abilities occurred to him at a later stage. The working notes would seem to confirm the latter, but are altogether too scant to offer proof. In default of any other evidence only the text can be referred to. And here Mr Dick's agency is ever so slightly anticipated, though we can only conjecture whether a showdown of this kind had been planned beforehand. From David's early schooldays on Mr Dick has always attached himself to Strong and would thus be likely to react emotionally to his friend's altered bearing. That he should sense that a plain gesture might go far towards healing the breach is not inconsistent with his childlike nature. At the same time, it may seem in keeping with Annie Strong's excitability that a move which again places husband and wife in the position of saint and supplicant, should induce her to break her long silence.

Having evoked the earlier scene in describing how Annie "with her hands imploringly lifted, fixed upon his face the memorable look I had never forgotten" (DC, ch. 45, p. 560f.), the narrator shifts into a dramatic, even theatrical mode where the falsely accused woman justifies her strange conduct in a long monologue, enlivened by interruptions of the listeners. While Dickens may have been influenced by eighteenth-century sentimental comedies in this respect, he was evidently trying to

attain a scenic effect similar to Kate's famous performance that concludes *The Taming of the Shrew*. Scenes of this kind demonstrate that only a very comprehensive concept of realism can accommodate the diversity of vision contained in Dickens's works. Quoted out of context, Annie's rhetorical address might seem more suitable for the ill-starred heroine of a melodrama than for the intimidated wife of a tiresome pedant. Conversely, a more natural speech pattern would have been inadequate for the purpose. After all, Mrs Strong, who has been virtually inarticulate over very many years, is at this point required to explain her bearing to a mystified, if well-meaning audience. By now it has become obvious that the long-lasting estrangement will end in complete reconciliation. This is finally accomplished when Annie rapturously winds up her speech with a highly emotional appeal: "Oh, take me to your heart, my husband, for my love was founded on a rock, and it endures!" (DC, ch. 45, p. 566). As the reunited Strong's hold each other in a firm embrace allegorising the solid harmony that is to prevail between them, an attentive reader would have noted with some astonishment that the "dearest and best of friends" is even now not addressed by his Christian name. However, such doubts do not occur to the listeners and to David Copperfield, who delicately removes himself from his friends at this point, drawing in effect an imaginary curtain upon their new-found happiness.

The solemnity of the scene is doubtless intended to lend conviction to Annie's pleading. Conversely, her declaration comprises several points that will hardly bear close scrutiny. The most anomalous part of her assertion is perhaps her complete rejection of Jack Maldon, not only on account of his shameless abuse of the Doctor's assistance, but for reasons of incompatibility:

If circumstances had not happened otherwise, I might have come to persuade myself that I really loved him, and might have married him, and been most wretched. There can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose.

(DC, ch. 45, p. 564)

There is a particular reason why Mrs Strong should be allowed to rise to such trenchant generalisations. Her words are meant to strike a painful note in the mind of the newly-married David, who is beginning to perceive the rashness of his own choice. At the same time, he might equally be expected to wonder what understanding could possibly exist between an elderly, absent-minded pedant and a young girl whose aspirations to learning never go beyond the dusting of books. Q. D. Leavis has pertinently

demonstrated the “grisly likeness of the menage”⁵ to Dorothea Brooke’s ill-conceived union in *Middlemarch* (1871/72); to which we might add the continual interference of a forward young relative, Will Ladislaw, as yet another similarity. In this respect, the unworldly Doctor is far more heedless of his wife’s predicament than the self-conscious Casaubon. Dorothea, it must be acknowledged, is quite up to her husband’s scholarly pursuits and therefore unhappy about his unwillingness to let her participate in them, whereas Annie seems content with the humble position of a handmaid. It is significant that she should habitually tie her husband’s shoe-laces, a courtesy which Dorothea only fleetingly considers. Both men are engaged in sterile and ineffectual labours: there is after all little difference between the ‘Key to all Mythologies’ and Strong’s lexicographical endeavours. The young relative, whose aversion to steady application is deplored in either case, certainly shows little respect for such pursuits. It must seem strange that Strong, an educator whose kind-heartedness is emphasised, should care so little for his spouse’s disposition. Like Tertius Lydgate, another character from *Middlemarch*, he evidently longs for a compliant partner radiating “that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music”⁶ Annie and also Rosamond Lydgate are indeed used to entertaining their husbands with their singing. Yet while Lydgate’s research work is of an entirely different calibre, he has the misfortune to be coupled to a firm-minded companion who openly disparages his occupation.

There is yet another correspondence between the two novels, which would seem to indicate that George Eliot did recollect *David Copperfield* when she was engaged in writing *Middlemarch*, though the motif in question is differently treated by her. As so often in nineteenth-century literature, Casaubon’s testament has considerable bearing on the plot structure. In the earlier novel Annie Strong confesses herself profoundly moved by her husband’s unflinching trust, whereas Dorothea feels justly humiliated by a specific codicil in Casaubon’s will that effectually deprives her of all claims should she marry Will Ladislaw. Just as George Eliot’s treatment of the January and May motif might to some extent derive from Dickens, the latter may have been influenced by Sheridan’s *School for Scandal*, where a young wife is deeply moved by her husband’s having drawn up a testament in her favour, though he would be fully entitled to question her faithfulness. Otherwise there appears little similarity between Dickens’s spiritless beauty and the lively Lady Teazle, whose vigorous husband may

yet prove responsive to her *joie de vivre*. Hence the couple's resolve to make their marriage work from now on carries conviction, which is hardly the case with the Strongs, whose flawed conjugality is of long duration.

Of such length, in fact, that the Doctor's endless delay in drawing up his will cannot be accounted for even if his excessive lack of resolve is considered. The paradoxical conclusion that he should only have realised the necessity of providing for a wife so much his junior when confronted with Uriah Heep's charges is too contrived to carry conviction. This unaccountable negligence is after all contrasted by the noticeable thoughtfulness of Barkis the carrier, who leaves a testament in his hoarding box which the legally trained David Copperfield finds perfectly valid. Within the thematic structure of the novel Strong's conduct must count as yet another case of the "various unaccountable and negligent proceedings of men, in respect of their testamentary arrangements" (DC, ch. 38, p. 471). Especially so, if we pause to consider how often Mrs Markleham, his loquacious and tactless mother-in-law, would have reminded him of his obligations to a sadly neglected wife. Read from this angle, an earlier passage which might not immediately strike a cursory reader gains added relevance.

Here we have to return to David's last visit to the Canterbury residence of the Strongs in chapter 19. On this occasion the Doctor is hard-pressed by Mrs Markleham to engage himself once more on behalf of Jack Maldon, this time with a view of obtaining a post in England; which would enable him to renew his association with Annie. Having possessed herself of a letter of his to her daughter, the obtrusive mother discloses its contents to the company. In doing so she blunders over the handwriting and misreads the word "Doctor" as "Proctor" (DC, ch. 19, p. 240), thus unconsciously introducing the designation of David's future profession, which is to have considerable bearing on his future career. The slip can hardly be blamed on the experiencing self, who will only acquire the exact meaning of the term after his departure. Could Mrs Markleham have introduced it deliberately? As David is soon to learn, a proctor's functions concern marriage and divorce law and the drafting of wills. A sensitive person would presumably react to the latent hint which is here conveyed. Wickfield, whose aversion to Annie visibly increases after this intervention, seems to comprehend the allusion well enough. It is, however, not taken in by the person it directly concerns. Several years have to pass before Strong engages legal experts to bequeath his entire property to his wife. In endeavouring to collate the various codes pertaining to the

marriage theme which this scene evokes we can only ascertain a note of pervasive uncertainty. The contemporary reader – and possibly even the author – would at this stage not have been able to forecast the solution of a conflict which is too diffusely described to allow any more definite deductions. As a matter of fact, any reader would be hard put to foretell that a kind but unobservant husband whose heedlessness verges on the irresponsible, and a deeply bewildered or even unsettled young woman should ever turn out to be congenial partners, whose love, “founded upon a rock”, is supposed to endure like the house of the wise man in the Biblical parable (Matt. 7:25). The allusion would not have been lost on the Victorians, who might, however, have been equally doubtful about its appropriateness.

And yet the author seems to have become more certain of his intentions between chapter 16, where the Strongs are first introduced, and chapter 19, where David’s misgivings are distinctly voiced. Numbers 6 and 7 of the serial publication to which the two chapters respectively belong came out within an interval of a few weeks during which Dickens might have reconsidered the further progress of the narrative. In chapter 19 after all, the narrator begins to distance himself from the suspicions of the experiencing self, acknowledging that the “dark cloud” that has fallen on the Canterbury idyll might be, to some extent at least, a reflection of his own moral turmoil.

It is not irrelevant that a very telling circumstance seems to have slipped from Copperfield’s mind, though the narrator recollected it well enough in recording the earlier incident. We have already mentioned the loss of the cherry-colored ribbon from Annie’s dress which little David perceived in Jack Maldon’s hand as his carriage rolled away. When he stumbles upon the Doctor and his wife some time afterwards, Annie has still not gained sufficient composure to fix her disordered dress. Her hair is loose and her face bears the disturbing expression which lingers so long in David’s mind. Many years later, Mrs Strong is offered the very belated chance to reverse any possible misconstruction of her conduct on that occasion. In her monologue she berates Maldon’s boldness before his departure, which apparently embarrassed her to such an extent that she found herself unable to disclose his misbehaviour to her husband. The stylised level of her speech may preclude the insertion of concrete details here. Perhaps a reference to “words that should have found no utterance” (DC, ch. 45, p. 565) would have sufficed for the sensitive

Victorian reader. Nevertheless, there remains a notable disparity between her account and the observed circumstances of the parting, which seem to have agitated those involved a great deal. Are we supposed to believe that Jack and Annie had been childhood sweethearts only, if he showed such passionate regard at his departure, which again caused her so much distress? As a forerunner of the philandering James Harthouse in *Hard Times*, Maldon might be expected to make flirtatious advances to a young woman who was so patently neglected; like Tom Gradgrind he might use her as a medium through which her husband's munificence could be tapped. There is, finally, every reason to imagine that an admirer's fervour would be roused by his imminent departure. Yet all these considerations cannot quite explain the emphasised introduction and subsequent elimination of the cherry-colored ribbon suggestive of a passionate attachment, just as the ripening peaches in the Doctor's garden seem to symbolise a so far unrequited erotic responsiveness. Signals of this kind usually indicate that the constraints of middle-class mores are about to be transgressed. In unfastening the ribbon from Annie's neckline, Maldon has encroached upon the husband's prerogative. Appropriating it as a fetish, he may be supposed to form a secret bond, which can no longer be minimised as an adolescent folly. Annie's violent reaction confirms that the advance cannot be shrugged off as a mere breach of etiquette. Conversely, her eventual explanation that this response ought to be regarded as proof of her righteous indignation, even revulsion cannot entirely convince. Leaving the melodramatic mode of the presentation aside, one might well wonder whether a married woman would only exhibit symptoms of shock, in fact be unable to fend for herself in such a situation.

These considerations raise the question of whether the reader is ever fully informed about the background to David's memorable impressions. The gaps in the narrative would argue for a certain degree of complicity on Annie's part, who in any case cannot count as a reliable narrator. On the other hand, her later statement need not be entirely false. Would it not seem probable that she was stunned by the violence of her own emotional response to an expected, if unsought approach? After all, the horrified expression on her face comprises shame and penitence as well as "pride, love, and trustfulness". Penitence for what? Surely not with regard to a former youthful attachment or on account of a brief physical weakness. Self-reproach rather, for feelings that had lain dormant or at least unacknowledged and which Annie, disturbed at her own response,

is now endeavouring to suppress. After all, her later conduct, especially her taciturnity and the tension which the experiencing self registers so observantly, might point to a traumatic experience. “My mind revolted from the taint” (DC, ch. 45, p. 565), as she recalls later. In disclosing her repressed feelings to a circle of keen listeners, Annie might hope to regain her own peace of mind rather than forgiveness from her husband, who will in all probability always remain ignorant of his wife’s anguish. That she should not have acknowledged, even to herself, the genuine cause of her embarrassment, the sexual arousal prompted by Maldon’s touch, may be symptomatic of her peculiar marital situation. It would certainly be in keeping with the Victorian frame of mind, which preferred suggestiveness and figurative allusion to present-day directness and clinical exactitude.

From this perspective, her express rejection of what she conceptualises as the “first mistaken impulse” of an “undisciplined heart” (DC, ch. 45, p. 564) gains a more pertinent meaning; especially if we consider how the very words weigh on David’s mind, who comes to apply them more than once to his own infatuation with his first wife Dora. The frequent recurrence of the phrase “undisciplined heart” – which on a later occasion is even reversed to explain David’s resolution to renounce his love for Agnes (DC, ch. 59, p. 711; ch. 60, p. 719) – has led Gwendolen Needham to construe it as a pervasive theme of the novel. In her view, David gains maturity through self-control or, even, self-chastisement.⁷ Yet this would be too narrow a code to summarise the deeply complex process of his moral growth. In addition, the same rigid doctrine is patently ridiculed in chapter 41 where the elder Miss Spenlow utters a solemn warning against rashness in matters of love. Her ornate apothegm might almost read like a parody of Copperfield’s so very belated courtship of Agnes, whose love for him has indeed lain concealed for a lifetime:

Affection [...] mature affection, homage, devotion, does not easily express itself. Its voice is low. It is modest and retiring, it lies in ambush, waits and waits. Such is the mature fruit. Sometimes a life glides away, and finds it still ripening in the shade. (DC, ch. 41, p. 510)

Is it pure chance that Miss Lavinia should even resort to the image of the solid rock – that Annie is to employ so rhetorically – to illustrate her point?

The light – for I call them, in comparison with such sentiments, the light – inclinations of very young people [...] are dust, compared to rocks.

David's marriage to Dora, whose death affects him profoundly, cannot simply be dismissed as an error of judgement. The extreme grief felt at her loss would go far to prove the opposite, or at least indicate the ambivalence of his attachment to his "child-wife", as Dora sees herself.

I sit down by the fire, thinking with a blind remorse of all those secret feelings I have nourished since my marriage. I think of every little trifle between me and Dora, and feel the truth, that trifles make the sum of life. Ever rising from the sea of my remembrance, is the image of the dear child as I knew her first, graced by my young love, and by her own, with every fascination wherein such love is rich. Would it, indeed, have been better if we had loved each other as a boy and girl, and forgotten it? Undisciplined heart, reply! (DC, ch. 53, p. 658)

It should not be overlooked that the desperate reasoning of the afflicted David that his and Dora's love should have been an adolescent, temporary attachment is contradicted through the implied reference. After all, Annie and Jack, who were "little lovers once" (DC, ch. 45, p. 564), have not overcome their youthful infatuation. We must also bear in mind that the narrator is at this point too closely involved to assess the past objectively. David Copperfield may be aware of the complexity of his feelings, but fails to analyse them to the reader's full satisfaction. There is some good reason why he should have become somewhat disillusioned when romance turned into the plain actuality of married life; yet there is no indication that his dissatisfaction ever reached a point where the example of the Strong's, of two persons as disparate in temper and outlook as they are in age, might conceivably have induced him to regret his own choice, which was exalted "with every fascination wherein such love is rich."

It might still be inferred that the domestic arrangements of the Doctor are held up as a model against which David's immature first match is measured. Yet this is the point where the underlying argument falters. As the narration of Dora's death demonstrates, the narrator still recalls his early love with a deep sense of loss. Sadly aware that he and his first wife were too young to have entered into marriage, he is retrospectively not inclined to contemplate a different partner, let alone an elderly husband as a more suitable companion for Dora. In fact, the reader may feel entitled to wonder whether David's imperfect felicity, though hardly founded upon a rock, might not be preferable to the frustrating sobriety of Annie Strong's drily solid *menage*. As it is, the pervasive comparison between the youthful attachments of David and Annie – ostensibly two cases where an "undisciplined heart" went astray – may, without any deconstructing,

work both ways. While David's love for Dora is censured through the analogy, Annie's affectionate regard for Jack Maldon, and possibly even his attachment to her, gains some further relevance thereby. Not only a modern critic, but also a perceptive Victorian reader, might suspect that Annie feels more deeply for Jack than she admits to herself, and to her small audience. The stilted wording of her avowal hardly bears close criticism. What after all is the reader to make of a blooming young woman who would identify her emotional awakening in terms of a "mistaken impulse" that had to be curbed to foster the growth of marital self-abnegation? Even if Annie's assertion of having "crowned the love and honour of [her] life" (DC, ch. 45, p. 564) on her wedding day could be construed into a more discursive statement, it would hardly yield more than an acknowledgement of deficiencies which must be compensated through unswerving submission.

One need not appeal to the moral principles of a later age to register discomfort at the doctrine of the "disciplined heart" that is advocated in this context. As a matter of fact, the narrator himself might be expected to disapprove of constraints which tend to choke natural feelings; recalling the misery of his own affectionate mother, who was broken "like a poor caged bird" (DC, ch. 14, p. 182) by a heartless disciplinarian. These are the words of Betsey Trotwood, who equally disapproves of David's attempts to train Dora and yet evidently comes to reverse her attitude in responding sympathetically to Annie's bondage.⁸ There is admittedly little similarity between David's stern stepfather, who wore his wife's life away through his rigidity, and the meek, self-deprecatory Doctor Strong. And yet both seem to affect their spouses in a similar way. Unless we were to suppose that Annie Strong, having found a voice to assert her complete loyalty to her patriarchal husband, will maintain a more active role in their marriage from now on.

This is evidently not the case, however. Conversely, we are furnished with further examples of a convention which allowed man virtual mastery over woman. Towards the end of the novel we hear once again of Murdstone, who has in the meantime entrapped another victim in a second wife. Again a spirited and affectionate woman is reduced to "a state of imbecility" (DC, ch. 59, p. 713) under his firm rule. In the subsequent finale the narrator also takes leave of the Strongs, cheerfully assuring the reader that the good old Doctor is "happy in his home and wife" (DC, ch. 64, p. 749), which seems to imply that the wife must be contented because

the husband is so. It might seem pedantic to deplore the fact that Dickens did not add a line or two in relation to Mrs Strong. Conversely, we may feel entitled to infer a slight hesitancy on his part from the omission. The writing is too consistent at this point to admit of purely accidental slips and unintentional gaps. On the whole, the substantial discrepancies, indeterminacies, and overtones concerning the character of Annie Strong suggest a genuine uncertainty on Dickens's part, which may have originated in a discord of acquired attitudes and personal beliefs.

These reflections may serve to clarify a striking discontinuity in the narrative to which we have already drawn attention. The circumstances of Jack Maldon's departure, which caused Annie so much uneasiness, comprise a component that assumes a symbolic significance. The cherry-colored ribbon is as much proof of Jack's passionate regard for Annie as it betokens her own reaction to his advances. Or so it must strike the reader, who will conclude that more will be heard about the incident. But it would be erroneous to anticipate serious consequences from the daring action. The cherry-colored ribbon, which Dickens deemed so important that he inserted a reference to it in the chapter plans, never recurs in the text. Though it impressed the experiencing self to a considerable degree, the narrator does not choose to introduce it again, whereas the episode itself is frequently recalled. Annie remains strangely silent on the loss of the ribbon even though she censures Jack's boldness.

Is there a way of explaining the inconsistency? In the absence of contemporary references one might assume a narrative strategy on the author's part to mislead the reader into casting about for an alternative line of narration. Q. D. Leavis would have us believe that Charles Dickens was endeavouring to keep his audience in suspense through inconclusive hints and suggestive images.⁹ We must bear in mind, though, that Dickens employed two main kinds of prolepsis in his novels. The direct mode is authorised by the narrator, who may emphasise the relevance of the signal by pointedly relating it to the future. Thus the narrator's ominous apostrophe to Edith Dombey that "it were well to die, indeed, at such a time!" (DS, ch. 30, p. 410) hints at disgrace and abject misery, which is fulfilled, though – as in the case of Emily – a less severe outcome was finally preferred. The other type of anticipation might be defined as a mere suggestion of an impending turn of events which does not commit the writer. For an example from *David Copperfield* we might cite Steerforth's heartless observation about the crudeness of seafaring people and their

kin before his visit to Yarmouth: "They have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded" (DC, ch. 20, p. 251). While no comment is here added, the reader has been sufficiently alerted to expect a selfish action of Steerforth; which is in fact borne out by his seduction of Emily that causes so much suffering to the Peggottys.

The incident highlighted by the red ribbon unquestionably belongs to the latter, a muted category of anticipation. As in the second passage, no elucidating comment is added. It might well be argued though that the symbolism of the red ribbon, preceded as it is by a pointed reference to ripening peaches in the Doctor's ancient garden, is so pertinent that any comment might have seemed gratuitous. In this way, dramatic turns of action are not ruled out, while the reader's attention is effectively incited. A comparison with an analogous passage in a later part of the novel will support this view. On a first visit to the house of Mr Spenlow, David is introduced to his host's daughter and immediately enthralled by her. Meeting Dora in the garden on the following morning, he describes her straw hat set with blue ribbons and cannot help wishing that he owned it as a "priceless possession" (DC, ch. 26, p. 337). Later, when Spenlow reproachfully returns his love letters to him, David notes with some tenderness that Dora has tied them up with a blue ribbon, which he associates with the headdress and thus once again with her (DC, ch. 38, p. 467). Evidently some minor symbolism is here employed emphasising David's infatuation, which the mature narrator recalls with emotion.¹⁰ But these impressions are too contingent to point to an as yet undisclosed future event. Especially so, as David would not dream of appropriating what he so ardently craves for. After all, the obstacles that intervene between him and Dora need not be insurmountable.

Compared to those indistinct signals, the cherry-colored ribbon, which figures so poignantly in the other love relationship, is invested with a superior potency and hence becomes suggestive of grievous, or at least disruptive, consequences. Yet expectations of such a kind remain suspended until Annie's monologue in chapter 45 settles the issue seemingly beyond doubt, though possibly not to the reader's satisfaction. While David's ardent love-making might, at least initially, seem as fraught with misery as Emily's passionate self-abandonment, the stifling domesticity of the Strongs represents too extreme an alternative to be accepted without demur.

Conversely, we should fail to do justice to Dickens's art if we overlooked the comparative consistency of the Strong plot. Even chapter 16, which might seem to set the scene for a fateful entanglement, contains a sufficient number of references to make the eventual reconciliation between the married partners at least plausible, if not convincing. While the number plans offer scant evidence in this respect, Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt still feel justified to assume that the outcome of the plot had always been a foregone conclusion.¹¹ In their opinion, the entire tale of marital discord leading from misunderstanding and doubt to regained harmony was conceived beforehand. Dickens would have introduced the Jack Maldon episode to provide Annie with the insight that she is to pronounce so solemnly in chapter 45, and which leaves such an impression on the narrator; – that there is indeed no greater disparity in marriage than “unsuitability of mind and purpose”. Tillotson and Butt support their reading by pointing to earlier examples of David's immaturity which are chronologically closer to the incident of Maldon's leave-taking than his own premature marriage. While at Canterbury, and in close proximity to Doctor Strong's household, he passes through two short-lived infatuations which the narrating self recalls with amusement. Yet this is hardly the mode in which Maldon's passionate attachment to Annie is related. Here the narrator adopts a very serious tone, asserting gravely that he is still at a loss to account for the horrified expression on Annie's face after her suitor's departure. Young David has gained a glimpse of the mysterious world of adulthood from which he is still excluded. Is it really to be believed that the motif of illicit love was introduced solely to cast some doubt on the firmness of David's affection for Dora?

In an article published several years after Tillotson and Butt, Milton Millhauser would wish to counter such an interpretation of the novel.¹² For him, the tense and gloomy atmosphere in chapter 16 can only forecast a grave outcome of the entanglement. The disclosure scene in chapter 45, where Annie emerges as the epitome of Victorian womanhood, would be out of line with the preceding narration. Dickens must have decided to invert the intended ending without being able to accommodate what had already been published. Subsequently, Sylvia Manning again questioned Millhauser's argument, which for her derives its force from the reader's discomfort about the factitious exaltation of a patently incongruous marital arrangement. Her own solution to the problem, however, that

the various discrepancies are to be considered artistic flaws rather than contradictions – “Dickens did not do these things well”¹³ – seems too facile an explanation for what is undoubtedly a complex issue.

We may pause at this point to consider two drawings of Annie and her husband recording David’s perturbing observation and the eventual reconciliation respectively. Both were rendered by the original illustrator “Phiz” (Hablot K. Browne) and must have been subjected to Dickens’s judgement before they went into print. The first drawing, accompanying number 6 of the serialised novel, shows the Doctor as a crudely featured nonentity complacently absorbed in his manuscript while Annie kneels before him in the posture of a supplicant. The heavily furnished study cluttered up with books, fossils, and archeological oddities conveys an impression of stifling closeness and constraint.¹⁴ The figure of the young woman offers a striking contrast to the setting. Partly disrobed, with her hair loosely floating, as suggested by the text, Annie seems all passionate, pulsating excitement. The artist has attempted to emphasise the haunting expression on her face by lending the features a voluptuous intensity, which is evidently not perceived by the “lustreless eye” of the dullard. The female figure bears a considerable likeness to the portrayals of Edith Dombey by the same artist. Edith, it will be recalled, functions as a *femme fatale* in the other novel, indirectly causing the death of the intriguer James Carker and the downfall of the house of Dombey. The second illustration, included in number 15 of *David Copperfield*, is differently conceived as the modified setting immediately conveys. Here the Doctor’s study renders the impression of a well-ordered room from which the oppressive details of the first drawing have been removed. Annie, once more placed in a kneeling position, is demurely dressed and without the seductive charms of the earlier presentation. Even more striking is the altered appearance of her scholar husband. In the studious posture of a man of learning, Strong exhibits intellectual, even ennobled features. He is keenly perceptive of his wife’s appeal.

It might be demurred that illustrators at times tended to exceed the suggestiveness of the text from which they were actually supposed to draw inspiration. Conversely, they were presumably more likely to be faulted by sceptical readers, who would have found it easier to compare pictures than examine extensive descriptions. In this particular case, the connection between the two drawings might not even be grasped without the prescriptive text. The initial illustration, contrasting a distraught beauty

with an obtuse dullard would seem to demonstrate the very “unsuitability of mind and purpose” which Mrs Strong is held to have avoided through a marriage of convenience. Considering how precise Dickens’s instructions to the collaborating artist usually were, we can only wonder why he should have let him fall into such a blatant error in this case. That is, if it was realised as an error at the time.

Can we still uphold the view that Charles Dickens had from the very beginning intended to exemplify an ideal marriage through the bond between the Doctor and his young wife? If this was indeed the case, he must have gone out of his way to mislead the reader, enlisting the illustrator’s assistance in fabricating a distorted impression that was to be falsified as the novel progressed. In the absence of written exchanges between Dickens and the artist, this possibility cannot be completely discounted. It might be assumed though that such a strategy would have met with some reaction of one kind or another; which was not the case. In contrast with novels like *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*, *David Copperfield* was not conceived as a tale of mystery and detection. Weighing the extant evidence against the complexity of the tale, we cannot legitimately adopt the view that Dickens wilfully riddled the narration with false clues. It seems far more probable that the disparate codes derive from the author’s own uncertainty about the function of diverse strands of action which contribute to David’s moral and intellectual development. In this particular case, Dickens may have originally envisaged two alternative follow-ups to the Jack Maldon episode, which gradually resolved themselves into what finally seemed the more appropriate conclusion. There is good reason to assume that a very broad idea of the novel was conceived before Dickens commenced his labours; but the “design”, as he called it, would have been open in various possible directions to allow the inclusion of new material, of alterations or at least reassessments as the writing progressed. Considering that the entire text was executed in the course of one and a half years, during which the author was engaged in various other activities, one can hardly imagine his copious mind to have remained stalled over this long period. In addition, it is well known that Charles Dickens kept a keen eye on the reception of his works and was always receptive to critical responses or suggestions.

Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt, who reject the possibility of an alternative resolution of the Strong entanglement, would still argue that Dick-

ens remained undecided about Dora's death at a comparatively advanced stage of the composition. In their opinion, David's immature marriage need not have ended tragically, as Agnes could have been incorporated into the household, overlooking the various domestic tasks in her wonted role of "benign counsellor".¹⁵ We would wish to submit a more inclusive model of Dickens' writing practice at this point. It seems to us that the author not only modified various turns in the narrative as he went along, but remained so acutely conscious of his uncertainties at times that he marked the possible moves out as distinct variants. This view would go far to account for the structural peculiarity of his writings and of *David Copperfield* in particular. The first lines of the novel offer a telling example. Whereas the title and the chapter heading would seem to determine the position of the narrator as the central figure, this premise is immediately challenged in the opening sentence: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (DC, ch. 1, p. 1). The reservation might simply be dismissed as a mere pleasantry on the part of the author, if it did not reflect his own mode of composition. There must have been many occasions when Dickens, still unsure as to what development a particular event or situation should take, felt compelled to leave more than one line of action open. Yet whatever the issue, the writing process as such would ultimately resolve the matter in hand.

Once again it may prove helpful to elaborate on Charles Dickens's mode of writing as various examples from his works have suggested it. It may be taken for granted that an overall plan existed in his mind before he set pen to paper. He may even have arrived at diverse details. Yet there must have been joints in the structure of the plot which he felt himself unable to determine at an early stage. In such a case Dickens seems to have proceeded in a very characteristic way. The problematical issue would be cast in an indefinite even ambiguous shape to allow for alternative developments. Nevertheless, extensive manipulation had to be used occasionally to effect an alteration. Thus the devious figure of Miss Mowcher was changed into its very opposite through an emotional appeal to the reader. In addition, the earlier description is craftily discredited as a misjudgment on the part of the immature David (DC, ch. 22; ch. 32).¹⁶ The intricate structure of Dickens's panoramic novels must favour a very wide range of narrative possibilities. We can therefore expect to encounter a variety of differing references when a critical stage in the narrative is imminent.

Conversely, an increased incidence of contrary signals may be taken to indicate that such a crucial point is proximate.

This is certainly the case when little David, having entered a more settled situation after a period of extreme suffering and hardship, is introduced to new associates among whom he is to pass on to adolescence and early manhood. Chapter 15, where he makes “another beginning”, is mainly devoted to a description of Mr Wickfield’s residence where his unformed mind is exposed to the contrary attributes of selfless devotion and ruthless self-seeking as represented respectively by Agnes Wickfield and Uriah Heep. And there are other aspects of social life that he has to comprehend. The following chapter, while admitting him to a *locus amoenus* of intellectual nurturing, also opens up a view of love and marriage that is more pronounced and yet more confusing than his earlier impressions. To a sensitive boy like David the inconsistencies in his mentor’s private life must seem bewildering. The self-absorbed pedant is coupled with a young beauty, who suffers herself to be courted by a gallant. Annie Strong appears perplexed by Maldon’s obtrusiveness, but does little to deter him, while the myopic Doctor seems unconcerned about this flagrant intrusion into his domesticity. The encroachment is disapproved of by Wickfield, but vigorously encouraged by Annie’s mother.

Small wonder that the boy is utterly confused by the conflicting impressions that force themselves upon him. Left to his own resources in this respect (though it is perhaps fortunate that he cannot obtain counsel from his false friend Steerforth on this point), David finds himself unable to correlate what his receptive mind has registered. In view of the disparity of the experience, he cannot opt for one particular discourse which might be confirmed but also discredited by his varying observations. How should the haunting expression on Annie’s face be read? Is the loss of the cherry-colored ribbon proof of her duplicity, and why has only David noticed it in Maldon’s hand? Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, calls on the reader to answer the question of whether Becky Sharp was “guilty or not” (ch. 53). The reply, which could never be as downright as the query, would admittedly not have much bearing on the plot. Dickens is also withholding information from the reader, but from a completely different motivation. Thackeray may wish to suggest that the inner life of a human being can never be grasped in its entirety. Dickens, conversely, seems genuinely uncertain about the further course his tale might take and hence projects his own bemusement into the mind of the immature

protagonist. It would be quite erroneous, for this very reason, to expect guidance from the narrator, who has been so definitive about the future downfall of Emily.

These considerations might add to our understanding of the ambiguous vision through which chapter 16 and the later relevant passages are perceived. It is much to the point that the variegated impressions should be communicated as they appeared to a young observer. Just as the reader has participated in the fairy-tale world of Blunderstone, he is here placed in close proximity to the confused notions of an unformed mind. The riddle of the colored ribbon loses some of its mystery if we trace the observations to an oversensitive adolescent consciousness. It is not by chance that the prurient Uriah Heep can view the entanglement only in terms of sexual misbehaviour whereas David will eventually comprehend it with more forbearance.

As mentioned above, chapter 19 returns to the Strongs once more as Copperfield, having finished school, is leaving for London. He is now an adult though still immature person and prone to pass ill-considered or even warped judgements. In contrast to the earlier presentation in chapter 16 where David's observations are mainly mediated as they would have occurred to the experiencing self, the narrator interferes several times in this context and in a very pointed way. This is not to say, though, that the former uncertainty has been superseded by definite pronouncements. Still unwilling or even unable to decide on the outcome of the affair, Dickens uses the opportunity to let his narrator reflect on the self-righteous and voyeuristic intrusiveness of his youthful self. The ominous significance which young David attributes to his recollections of that memorable night is dismissed as a false judgement; as is his attitude to Annie Strong –

I mistrusted the natural grace and charm of her manner; and when I looked at Agnes by her side, and thought how good and true Agnes was, suspicions arose within me that it was an ill-assorted friendship. (DC, ch. 19, p. 240)

A desultory reading of the passage might suggest that Charles Dickens was overemphasising the emotional instability of the young man here. But his former feelings for and present revulsion from Annie have some bearing on his high regard for Agnes Wickfield, whom he now tends to cast in the role of saint. Characteristically, his outlook comes close to her disturbed father's "diseased love" (DC, ch. 60, p. 721) for his child

at the time. The more settled David Copperfield of chapter 45, married to little Dora and beginning to perceive the error of having yielded too eagerly to his boyish infatuation, is in a better situation to grasp the mutual deference of the Strongs. He may even have come to realise the relative importance of sexual compatibility, so essential to his own marriage, barely attained or even absent from their union. He is, in fact, approaching mature manhood when he will turn out to be a genuine partner for Agnes.

A reading along these lines will allow us to enter upon the central theme of the novel, the moral growth of a talented and highly sensitive person, which is held to have originated in Dickens's private memories and personal concerns. In dwelling on a variety of influences and experiences that mould David's mind, the author is resorting to metaphorical patterns to lend shape to his own innermost longings and apprehensions. Transforming deeply-felt events into a fictitious account he might be expected to manifest his personal involvement more prominently at times. Yet the constraints of the particular mode of publication in conjunction with a firm endeavour to unfold a coherent tale would have acted against an uncontrolled absorption in personal remembrances. Nevertheless, there must have been moments when the narrative pattern could not accommodate his emotional attachments and imaginative flights. Whenever such indulgences or deviations take place, we are entitled to assume that Charles Dickens had been unable to curb a narrative spontaneity. Subsequently, the narrator may be called in to rectify what in this case is accordingly construed as an overreaction or false move of the experiencing self. Quite often an attempt to impose consistency is reflected in diverse modifications, which would go far to reassure a bewildered reader. In other cases, Dickens may have been too deeply involved in a descriptive detail or specific turn of action to adjust it retroactively. Thus the narrator distances himself from the adolescent David's ill-conceived judgement on Mrs Strong in chapter 19, whereas nothing is said that might revise the boy's puzzlement about the incidents. Annie's horrified look is never satisfactorily explained, nor is the reader's mind put to rest about the cherry-colored ribbon, which features so prominently in the account. It is this failure to rationalise a suggestive signal that would go far to affirm the profound significance it must have held for the author. We are without doubt dealing with a symbol of considerable consequence here.

In discussing the marital affairs of Doctor Strong and his wife we can legitimately speak in terms of a subordinate or even covert plot. At the same time, the story of their alienation and eventual reconciliation functions as a parable of maturation, which comes to an end when the moral growth of the protagonist has been achieved. The contrived denouement of chapter 45, however, cannot be so readily accepted. It would seem that Dickens is too much at pains to contain a process of fictionalising in which he himself is involved. Conversely, the doubts which many readers will feel about the overt approval of a union between youthful ardour and dullish self-absorption must be aggravated by the perception that the author's emotional engagement seems to run contrariwise. We are hard put to accept that the man who felt so passionately about the vagaries of young lovers should think himself compelled to uphold the merits of a bond in which youth is patently sacrificed to convenience. Yet we ourselves may be at fault in this respect by putting too literal a construction on the solemn winding-up as enacted by Annie. As the final link of a parable it would have to incline towards the abstract, resorting to an apothegm not directly supported by the tale itself. What Annie extolls above all in her assertion of marital fulfilment is in fact the prevalence of security, expressed through the Biblical figure of the "rock" on which the wise man built his house. What she most desires is indeed to lie "warm at home, secure and safe", as a far more resolute spouse maintained in a not so dissimilar monologue.¹⁷

Though Annie Strong dwells on some aspects of the married state only in her final speech, her statements would have been largely in accordance with contemporary conventions. The Victorians seem to have accepted the solution, or may have comprehended that their favourite author could not venture any further reflections in this context. Was Annie truly happy, was she guilty or not, had a neurotically frigid, possibly even unbalanced personality found the sheltered security she was sorely in need of? They might just as well have queried why Edith Dombey's marriage took such a disastrous turn or why Louisa Bounderby did not succumb to James Harthouse's seductive approaches. The Victorian novel offers diverse clues on human relationships but stops short of clinical diagnosis or crude directness.

Two important elements in the thematic structure of the novel still have to be considered. The narrative of David Copperfield's progress through an alien and in many ways incomprehensible world offers itself as a realistic tale, but may also be read as the symbolical enactment of a

configuration of abstract ideas. Two goals in the life of man receive special emphasis in this context: his search for happiness and, even more so, his desire for security. The former is invoked in a dream of David where he pictures himself in a garden. In the manuscript version the boy dreams of a “garden that I picked shells and pebbles in, with little Em’ly all night” (DC, ch. 6, p. 76). In the final text he imagines himself walking in the garden on his own. The image is revived at a later stage when Copperfield falls into a reverie in which he is “wandering in a garden of Eden all the while, with Dora” (DC, ch. 26, p. 335). A longing for security, on the other hand, becomes evident in his prayer that, having found shelter with Betsey Trotwood, he “never might be houseless any more, and never might forget the houseless” (DC, ch. 13, p. 170). Has David Copperfield, who glorifies his final state at the end, also found the happiness that he so much desired at the side of an apparently perfect companion, who would go to any length to make his life easy and secure? We cannot fail to observe that marital contentment is in this case also expressed through denotations of firmness and solidity:

Clasped in my embrace, I held the source of every worthy aspiration I had ever had; the centre of myself, the circle of my life, my own, my wife; my love of whom was founded on a rock. (DC, ch. 62, p. 740)

Such rhetoric can hardly fail to move, though it comes uncomfortably close to Miss Lavinia’s spinsterish maxim. An impressionable reader might be permitted to give preference to an earlier passage in which David and Dora’s romance is feelingly evoked:

What an idle time! What an unsubstantial, happy, foolish time! Of all the times of mine that Time has in his grip, there is none that in one retrospection I can smile at half so much, and think of half so tenderly. (DC, ch. 33, p. 418)

We return once again to the last but one chapter of the novel where Daniel Peggotty, now a hale and hearty old man, is conjured up once more by the narrator. With the kindly, if self-assured interest of a well-established Victorian family, the Copperfields make much of him. Nothing pleases them more though than his merry tale of Mrs Gummidge’s extreme ire at the advances of another immigrant, who plainly thought that a widowed woman might prove responsive to a straightforward proposal. Especially the demure Agnes is so taken by his account that she “could not leave off laughing” (DC, ch. 63, p. 744). In fact, she evinces more amusement than the narrator has ever noticed in his wife. There is

patently another reason why old Peggotty should have been re-introduced at this late point.

It is not difficult to see why Charles Dickens should have made a last attempt to humanise David's perfect companion, who must not fall behind her charming predecessor by any means. Yet in spite of such devices even his friend and adviser John Forster failed to be entirely convinced.:

Of the heroines who divide so equally between them the impulsive, easily swayed, not disloyal but sorely distracted affections of the hero, the spoilt foolishness and tenderness of the loving little child-wife, Dora, is more attractive than the too unflinching wisdom and self-sacrificing goodness of the angel-wife Agnes. (Forster, p. 557)

His acute assessment is wound up by a telling observation. Focussing on David's first marriage, which falls short of the blissful state he had anticipated, and the "old unhappy loss or want of something" (DC, ch. 48, p. 594; ch. 58, p. 700) that he feels so acutely, Forster intimates that this notion "reflected also a personal experience which had not been supplied in fact so successfully as in fiction." We are at no loss to understand the veiled suggestion. "Fact" presumably refers to Dickens's emotional and intellectual frustration and ultimately to Ellen Ternan, with whom he hoped to attain the contentment his own marriage had failed to provide for him, while "fiction" means Agnes, the ideal companion with whom David is supposed to enjoy an unclouded harmony in which happiness and a sense of security are blended.

Or does he? Can the narrating self, and ultimately the man behind the narrator, convince us in this respect? For Harry Stone, "Agnes is not a ripening of Dora, but an alternative to Dora. Dora is all sexuality, Agnes all spirituality."¹⁸ This opposition may seem too stark a contrast in view of the complexity of the two figures. There can be little doubt, however, that Agnes suggests spiritual comfort and security above all rather than earthly happiness. Recalling once again the youthfulness of the so very pretty Annie, the ripening peaches in the old garden and the cherry-colored ribbon, Emily's haunting blue eyes, and Dora's curls and blue ribbons forever associated with the scent of geraniums in a beautiful garden (DC, ch. 26, p. 338), we cannot evade the conclusion that a longing for happiness, as found in the erotic aspect of man's relationship to woman, was the more dominant element in Charles Dickens's mind at that time and that his eulogy of the firm loyalty of the Stronges and the apotheosis of the hero's solid family life are little more than attempts at concealing a persistent unsatisfied craving of his. Conversely, those impassioned descriptions might

simply be regarded as remainders of alternative narrative structures which the author was not able to eliminate in their entirety; vestiges of fictionalising, in fact, of a man who should and would have known that such visions of happiness ran counter to a strong desire for security in a world that might be expected to prove inimical to his innermost longings.