

**PERPLEXING MASTER-SERVANT RELATIONSHIPS
IN DAVID COPPERFIELD: CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**

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Abstract: In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens presents diversities in the treatment of servants: contrary to David Copperfield's intimate relations with the family servant, Clara Peggotty, he portrays Steerforth's relationship with his man-servant Littimer and his mother's companion Rosa Dartle, which is problematic in the sense of master-servant relationships. Class in *David Copperfield*, represents itself in a fixed manner, in other words, as in Victorian wealthy families' manner, in spite of lower class people's potential for feeling, their generosity, affectionate attentiveness for others. In this study, how class differences are represented through characters is going to be scrutinized.

Key Words: Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, Victorian England, Master-Servant Relationship, Class Consciousness.

David Copperfield'de Karmaşık Efendi-Hizmetkâr İlişkileri:

Sınıf Bilinci

Özet: Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* romanında efendi-hizmetkâr ilişkileri arasındaki davranış farklılıklarını, David Copperfield'in aile hizmetkârı Clara Peggotty ile olan, Steerforth'un hizmetkârı Littimer ve annesinin yardımcısı olan Rosa Dartle ile olan sorunlu ilişkiler üzerinden betimler. *David Copperfield* romanında sınıf bilinci, alt sınıftan insanların da duygularının olmasına rağmen üst sınıfa mensup zengin ailelerin içinde değişmez bir biçimde karşımıza çıkar. Bu çalışmada, bu sınıf farklılıklarının üst sınıf ailelerde nasıl yansıtıldığı ortaya konacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, Kraliçe Viktorya Dönemi İngilteresi, Efendi-Hizmetkâr İlişkisi, Sınıf Bilinci.

In Victorian England, the concept of social class not only depended upon the amount of money people had but also it did rest on birth and fa-

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mily connections.¹ Class status revealed itself in clothing, education, manners even in the numbers of the servants a Victorian family employed. Thus, in the nineteenth century, servants were not only status symbols among the wealthy families but also necessities as their labour was required to carry out daily duties such as cleaning the house, cooking the meals, and serving the family. Though their existence was essential to the family, their invisibility was also a rudiment for the family because the sight or sound of a servant was thought to offend people of 'gentle birth' which in fact refers to the wealth of a family. The position of the Victorian families' children was not very much different from the servants either. As Frank Dawes points out that they were not to be seen or heard, and most children were held to the same standard with the servants.² Children, who were degraded to the status of servants, were spending more time with them rather than their biological mothers and fathers. Consequently, children begin to see the servants as their surrogate families since they feel the intimacy in servants' behaviours that should be in their own families. In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens presents diversities in the treatment of servants: contrary to David Copperfield's intimate relations with the family servant, Clara Peggotty, we are presented with his friend Traddle's being discarded from the house in which the former governess had been the mistress of the house. And on the other side Dickens also presents Steerforth's relationship with his man-servant Littimer and his mother's companion Rosa Dartle, which is problematic in the sense of master-servant relationships. Class in *David Copperfield*, represents itself in a fixed manner, in other words, as in Victorian wealthy families' manner, in spite of lower class people's potential for feeling, their generosity, affectionate attentiveness for others. These qualities have nothing to do in reducing this social construction; boundaries would remain there despite the flexibility in the treatment of servants in the novel.

Servants are both the status symbols for the Steerforth family and also the figure of authority since the house lacks the patriarchal authority. Children of Victorian families were first disciplined and educated at home and family life was central to the idea of masculinity during the nineteenth century. Particularly the boy, at first, becomes a man, and gains his full adult status, as he becomes the patriarch: husband, father, and master of the household gradually.³ In the context of family life, the father was the

¹ Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Greenwood Press, 1996), 17.

² Frank Dawes, *Not In Front Of The Servants: Domestic Service in England 1850-1939* (London: Wayland Publishers, 1973), 32.

³ John Tosh. *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 35.

dominant figure and the lack of this patriarch as well as his presence in a Victorian household would result in corruption in the family life just as it happened in the Steerforth family. Knowing that he has not reached his adult status yet Steerforth wishes for an authoritarian patriarch in his words to David:

'David, I wish to God I had had a judicious father these last twenty years!' 'My dear Steerforth, what is the matter?'

'I wish with all my soul I had been better guided!' he exclaimed.

'I wish with all my soul I could guide myself better!'⁴

The guidance with full of pride, given by his mother leads Steerforth into the lives of "that sort of people" (247) referring to lower class people for the sake of either seeking intimacy among those people or having miscellaneous pleasures in the life he owns. He even wishes to be as simple as Mr. Peggotty or as lout as his nephew Ham, since he has the burden of the proud patriarch that has to be maintained in Steerforth's family as imposed by his mother. Though David considers Steerforth as his other self, referring to him "as brave as a lion" (126), Steerforth sees Rosa Dartle and Mrs. Steerforth as lions. He thinks that he "became food for lions" (269) referring to his own family. He obviously thinks that he has been victimised by his own mother though he thinks that his mother "is a little vain and prosy" (244) about him.

Steerforth as the name suggests an imperative, points to his uncontrollable personality that has the quality of leadership. And also with the mistake made by Mr. Peggotty in Chapter X, the name also refers to Steerforth's link with sailing, foreshadowing his drowning: " 'You said it was Rudderford', observed Ham, laughing. 'Well?', retorted Mr Peggotty. 'And yer steer with a rudder, don't ye? It ain't fur off'. (126) Steerforth has a well-developed class-consciousness that was imposed upon himself by his mother Mrs. Steerforth. Although the Steerforth family possesses no titles, both the attitudes within the family and also towards other people associate their link with aristocracy. Thus, Steerforth was expected to assume the power of the dead patriarch, as the aristocracy demanded as social legitimacy. However, Steerforth does not have this maturity to take the role of the dead father. The family as an institution, instead of standing for communal values, is considered as the indication of social status as for Steerforth family. Bossche states that though there is a struggle within each member, a bachelor, a widow and an orphan, they consider themselves as 'a family' to indi-

⁴ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 269. The references to the text will be indicated within the brackets throughout the essay.

cate their class arrogance.⁵ Nevertheless, Steerforth's class snobbery is debilitated when he comes across the Peggotty family whom he defines as coarse people. When David invites Steerforth to accompany him to Yarmouth, Steerforth does not hesitate to accept the offer, he would say "to see that sort of people together" (247) would be worth a journey. Miss Dartle also says:

Oh; but; really? Do tell me. Are they though?" she said.

"Are they what? And are who what?" said Steerforth.

"That sort of people.- Are they really animals and clods, and beings of another order? I want to know *so* much."

"Why there's a pretty wide separation between them and us" said Steerforth, with indifference. "They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt very easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say-some people contend for that, at least; and I am sure I don't want to contradict them-but they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded."

"Really!" said Miss Dartle. "Well, I don't know, now, when I have been better pleased than to hear that. It's so consoling! It's such a delight to know that, when they suffer, they don't feel! Sometimes I have been quite uneasy for that sort of people; but now I shall just dismiss the idea of them, altogether. Live and learn. I had my doubts, I confess, but now they're cleared up. I didn't know, and now I do know; and that shows the advantage of asking." (247)

It is very ironic to hear the words that Rosa says; she completely draws herself out of "that sort of people". She is a relative of Steerforth family and a companion to Mrs. Steerforth but in fact, she is treated like a servant in the house. Though she herself is very much a representative of that class, she ignores her position in the family. Steerforth's utterances upon their sensitiveness are also ironic since he later observes that those people's relationship is more intimate than their own. Particularly, his intimacy with her mother fails to follow theirs.

When Steerforth says "It's a quaint place, and they are quaint company, and it's quite a new sensation to mix with them." (266), he only means Emily indicating his growing attachment for her. Mrs. Steerforth's mother-love depended upon family pride cannot prevent Steerforth's eloping with Emily who is inferior to him. He brings dishonour upon him and his family

⁵ Chris R. Vanden Bossche. "Cookery, not Rookery: Family and Class in David Copperfield". In *David Copperfield and Hard Times*. Ed. John Peck (Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995), 36.

by seducing Emily. Emily's elopement to Steerforth is impossible not only due to middle-class morality but also Emily's elopement would be unattainable due to the hierarchical order among their classes. Mrs. Steerforth is sure of the fact that Steerforth would not marry her since "such a marriage would irretrievably blight her son's career, and ruin his prospects. Nothing is more certain than that it never can take place and never will." (386) As Steerforth's powerful physical and intellectual charm arouses passionate feelings in Emily, it arouses frustrated passion in Rosa Dartle as well.

Rosa Dartle is a self-tormentor, and has a frustrated passion for Steerforth; she believes that his mother's possessiveness and class-consciousness prevents her from marrying her son. She has an intelligence and unhappy temper. Steerforth's throwing a hammer at her and resulting in a scar on her mouth is not only a representative of a devilish evidence of her passion for him but also indicates her submissiveness to the power of a patriarch. When Steerforth says "The painter hadn't made the scar, but I made it" (250) to David, he seems to be very proud of his action and he acts as if he is the creator who is expecting her to be obedient without questioning.

Miss Dartle's fury with Emily is due to the idea of having lost Steerforth for a lower class girl having no peculiarity other than only being pretty.

" 'I ask you only to tell me, is it anger, is it hatred, is it pride, is it restlessness, is it some wild fancy, is it love, what is it, that is leading him?'" (357)

Miss Dartle questions what attracted him to a girl who is in a lower position than him. She wants to know what she is endowed with she herself lacks. Knowing the difference in their classes she is driven mad: "'they are a depraved, worthless set. I would have her whipped!'... 'I would trample on them all,' she answered. 'I would have his house pulled down. I would have her branded on the face, dressed in rags, and cast out in the streets to starve.'" (388) As Storey points out her words are indicative of her sexual passion falling upon verbal passion of fury.⁶ She discloses her anger verbally feeling neither the authority of Steerforth nor the necessity of music to express herself. Rosa Dartle's playing the harp could be considered not only as a medium of expressing herself but also as indicative of her desire to be recognised as a real member of a 'genteel' Victorian family. In the Victorian era every young woman was expected to play at least one instrument not only for the sake of pleasure but also the knowledge of music and musical instruments raised her chances of obtaining a husband. Rosa enjoys the pleasure that Steerforth gets from her music and feels her power upon him

⁶ Graham Storey, *David Copperfield: Interweaving Truth and Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 83.

however, she cannot much resist the power of Steerforth as David has also seen in her eyes:

That she should struggle against the fascinating influence of his delightful art-delightful nature I thought it then-did not surprise me...I knew that she was sometimes jaundiced and perverse. I saw her features and her manner slowly change; I saw her look at him with growing admiration; I saw her try, more and more faintly but always angrily, as if she condemned a weakness in herself, to resist the captivating power that he possessed; and finally, I saw her sharp glance soften, and her smile become quite gentle, and I ceased to be afraid of her as had really been all day... (359)

And after Rosa starts playing her harp, Steerforth and David follow her and Steerforth persuades her to play and sing for them:

...I don't know what it was, in her touch or voice, that made that song the most unearthly I have ever heard in my life, or can imagine. A minute more and this had roused me from my trance – Steerforth had left his seat and gone to her, and had put his arm laughingly round her, and had said, 'Come, Rosa, for the future we will love each other very much!' and she had struck him, and had thrown him off with the fury of a wild cat, and had burst out of the room. (359-60)

Rosa intelligently and remarkably knows that he is mocking her and she is very much annoyed by his behaviour. She has a kind of masochistic pleasure to provoke Steerforth in his treatment of her just as she enjoys the pleasure of bearing the scar in her mouth. Steerforth is also attracted to her since she stands in the house as both a forbidden object and also plaything. Nevertheless, Steerforth betrays Rosa by eloping with Emily, his new plaything. For Rosa, there is no escape from her position both in the house and in Steerforth's eyes. She is silenced by Steerforth, turning her to music, like Philomela who literally used weaving and the nightingale's song as her voice to tell her story of rape. Dartle uses music as a sort of device to express herself but she fails to assert her needs. Upon the news of Steerforth's death she is burst into words against Mrs. Steerforth "striking the scar":

'When he grew into the better understanding of what he had done, he saw it and repented of it! I could sing to him, and talk to him, and show the ardour that I felt in all he did, and attain with labour to such knowledge as most interested him; and I attracted him. When he was freshest and truest, he loved *me*. Yes he did! Many a time, when you were put off with a slight word, he has taken Me into his heart!' (654).

What Rosa Dartle desired was to pass merely beyond being a dart to be played, as her surname suggests. The connotative possibilities of her both first and surname allow us awareness into vision of Rosa Dartle character.

"Rosa Dartle" as a full name carries contradictions within itself, because Rosa recalls the image of flowers and beauty, presumably fragility, on the other hand her surname suggests simply a "dart". Rosa Dartle character is both literally and figuratively as sharp as a dart, or possibly could be said as poisonous as an arrow as it is felt in her words upon the death of Steerforth:

Have I been silent all these years, and shall I not speak now? I loved him better than you ever loved him! turning on her fiercely. I could have loved him, and asked no return. If I had been his wife, I could have been the slave of his caprices for a word of love a year. I should have been. Who knows it better than I? You were exacting, proud, punctilious, selfish. My love would have been devoted - would have trod your paltry whimpering under foot! (654)

Rosa Dartle blames Mrs. Steerforth for laying boundaries between her and Steerforth. She could have been a mistress to Steerforth if he was not so much affected by his mother's class-consciousness. However, after the death of Steerforth, they become dependent upon each other particularly Mrs. Steerforth upon Rosa Dartle since she is paralysed and "she lay like a statue" (655) though doctors were in attendance and many things had been tried. Rosa, never leaves her, and becomes a mother figure to Mrs. Steerforth, having the responsibility of both her and the house.

The other character in the Steerforth family is a man-servant Littimer who does not act according to the roles of a conventional Victorian servant, instead he plays an important role as an evil instrument in Steerforth's immoral deeds. Littimer is later guilty of theft and is captured with the help of Miss Mowcher. Connotations of his name is 'litter' meaning 'rubbish' and 'disorder', and also which is obvious suggesting 'littler', maybe he is not little in his appearance but he is little in his deeds that lack morality. On the other hand his name also offers 'lither' meaning 'pliant' but David Copperfield notices the opposite as he indicates in his words. David says of him:

I believe there never existed in his station a more respectable-looking man. He was taciturn, soft-footed, very quiet in his manner, deferential, observant, always at hand when wanted, and never near when not wanted; but his great claim to consideration was his respectability. He had not a *pliant*⁷ face, he had rather a stiff neck, rather a tight smooth head with short hair clinging to it at the sides, a soft way of speaking, with a peculiar habit of whispering the letter S so distinctly, that he seemed to use it oftener than any other man; but every peculiarity that he had he made respectable. (250-51)

⁷ My emphasis.

His whispering the letter S is implicative of a snake that will lead Steerforth to the sin and consequently ruin him. Littimer is a brilliant representative of hypocrisy and David's description is a reminiscent of a patriarch rather than a mere servant. Moreover, his silence, invisibility and his being always at hand when required, as Melikoğlu states, is in accordance with what Victorian upper class families would want their servants to be.⁸ However, in fact, Steerforth's man-servant Littimer seems to have no moral life since he not only plays an important role in Steerforth's elopement with Emily but also he thinks of marrying Emily whom his master is tired of. He is desirous for replacing his master's place. David Copperfield is infuriated by Littimer's scheme at their elopement because in this way it would be easier to weaken the case of Steerforth. His rage of a manservant is more comprehensible rather than putting the blame upon his close friend. Though the novel seems to be asserting class indifferences at some point, at another level, it reinforces it.

In *David Copperfield* relation between man servant Littimer and his master Steerforth is not a typical of Victorian master-servant relationship. Littimer's guiding his master in his acts, becomes a reason in Steerforth's ruin, and indirectly results in his death. Similarly, Rosa Dartle, being inferior to Steerforth, desires to marry to Steerforth who is in a higher rank than herself and loses him forever. Dickens, while portraying intimate relations between David and Clara Peggotty, he does not allow Victorian social status to be collapsed by either marriage bond or any other hypocrite acts of lower class people. The point in *David Copperfield* is that vicious and tenacious ones are doomed to fade away not to be allowed to a higher rank just as Littimer and Uriah has not been allowed to attain the class rank.

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⁸ Esra Melikoğlu, *Allies and Antagonists: The Ambivalent Relationship between the Servant and the Child of the House in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (İstanbul: Türk Kütüphaneciler Derneği İstanbul Şubesi, 1998), 101.

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