Abstract


Beaten by his stepfather, cut off from the love and care of his mother, David Copperfield turns for companionship to a company of friends whom the gloomy Murdstones have not had the forethought to suppress:

My father had left a small collection of books in a little room upstairs, to which I had access (for it adjoined my own) and which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time-they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii,—and did me no harm. . . . This was my only and my constant comfort. When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life. . . The reader now understands, as well as I do, what I was when I came to that point of my youthful history to which I am now coming again.

In this wonderful passage (which is even more wonderful read in full), David, the mature author of his own life story, reminds his readers of the power of the art of fiction to create a relationship between book and reader and to make the reader, for the duration of that relationship, into a certain sort of friend. Novels are David's closest associates; he remains with them for hours in an intense, intimate, and loving relationship. As he imagines, dreams, and desires in their company, he becomes a certain sort of person. In fact, the narrator clearly wishes us to see that the influence of David's early reading has been profound in making him the character we come to know, with his fresh childlike wonder before the world of particulars, his generous, mobile, and susceptible heart. And the novel as a whole, in its many self-referential reflections, calls readers to ask themselves, as well, what is happening to them as they read: to notice, for example, that they are sometimes too full of love for certain morally defective characters to be capable of rigorous judgment; that they are perceiving the social world around them with a new freshness of sympathy; in short, that they are taking on increasingly, in the very shape of their desire and wonder, the view of David's father-that "a loving heart is better and stronger than wisdom."

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