

TRUE ROMANCE? DIRTY DAVY AND THE DOMESTIC SUBLIME: FROM THE ALPS TO THE ABJECT IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD*

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The Alps in *Frankenstein* is the place where Dr Frankenstein retreats in order to take a break from the horrors associated with creating a monster. However, far from getting away from it all, Frankenstein is confronted with it all. Despite the remote and desolate nature of Frankenstein's retreat, the hideous and reproachful creature assiduously manages to hunt Frankenstein down for the express purpose of recounting to him its exceedingly miserable life-story. Correspondingly in Sigmund Freud's classic case study "Katharina" from *Studies on Hysteria*, the Alps is the place where Freud goes in order to take a break from his hysterical women patients. Amusingly enough, while partaking of its enveloping serenity, he is approached by yet another hysterical woman who quite suddenly needs high-altitude counselling. While both these texts may seem light years away from *David Copperfield*, their respective Alpine scenes, each with its evasion followed by collision framework, do parallel the *David Copperfield* Alps scene to a significant degree.

Throughout most of *David Copperfield* the protagonist David finds Agnes, the heroine in waiting, to be eminently resistible. Admittedly he doesn't go to the Alps to take a break from the cloying nature of her love, and she doesn't unexpectedly show up to entreat him and disturb his peace of mind. Rather he goes there because a visit to the Alps fits nicely with his roving mourning tour of Europe following the deaths of Dora, Ham and Steerforth. Although Agnes has neither instigated nor physically interrupted his trip, she does quite successfully punctuate his Alpine sojourn through her fervent and stirring letter. This letter, offering solace and inspiration, has the direct effect of compelling David to pull himself together by dint of discipline and hard work. It also compels him finally to admit to himself the love he feels for her: "There was no name for the love I bore her, dearer to me, henceforward, than ever until then" (888). Agnes then is ever loving, kind and encouraging; she couldn't possibly trouble David in any psychological sense. After all isn't she the embodiment of peace, sympathy and virtue? In this paper I would like to argue against the prevailing literal and dismissive view of Agnes promulgated by critics such as Harold Bloom and Barbara Hardy.¹ Agnes is much more than just a "legless angel of Victorian romance" (Orwell 85)—she is instead dreadful and terrifying in the extreme. In fact she is as "aweful" and sublime as David is dirty, and it is in the Alps scene that this becomes most apparent.

If the central shaping tensions of David's formative years are carefully examined it can be shown that rather than being a spotless Victorian hero, he is fundamentally

¹ "Agnes is a disaster, and that dreadful "pointing upward!" is not to be borne" (Bloom 7). "I think the religious/feminine ideal presented in Agnes is repulsive" (Hardy 127-28).

sullied. In fact from the very first line of *David Copperfield*, David displays anxiety at the prospect that he may be pushed out of his proper place as its hero: "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" (49).

Throughout the book the notion of being in the right place is extremely important to David. Unfortunately for him, however, he is more often than not made to feel displaced or else to encounter "matter out of place." According to anthropologist Mary Douglas:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. (35)

If David wants to *matter* in anyone's life it is in his mother's: Clara Copperfield is far and away the love of David's life. At first he feels "right at home" with her. In her eyes he feels himself to be a King, an elevated position of which Murdstone is well aware: "As my mother stopped down on the threshold to take me in her arms and kiss me, the gentleman said I was a more highly privileged little fellow than a monarch" (67). While at his mother's side David is in the best place of all—not just a King, but the only man in the world for her as the following Edenic description testifies: "Now I am in the garden at the back . . . with a high fence, and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden, and where my mother gathers some in a basket, while I stand by, bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved" (64-65).

While this scene is quite lyrical in its ambient evocation of childhood happiness, it also contains more than a hint of tension. First, while the garden is a place of infinite plenitude, with its high fence and padlock it is also a discrete place of bounded limits. Second, it is simultaneously a site of enticement, desire and transgression; the unvoiced allusion to Eden is all too clear. In just one sentence we are presented with a pre-lapsarian state and a post-lapsarian state. Of course, in the Adam and Eve paradigm sin originated with Eve: before her forbidden fruit episode, man could live in Paradise for eternity, but owing to her sin man is deprived of Paradise and condemned to suffering and mortality. What happens to David loosely echoes this pattern. Before his mother remarries David lives in a timeless, heavenly kingdom; after she remarries David effectively "falls"² and feels like dirt; the kingdom is sacked, he is deposed, and painful

² In Chapter 19 David claims his first "fall" in life occurs when a dirty and dishevelled man takes his box seat on the Canterbury coach (342-43). Despite this contention it is nonetheless obvious that his first real "fall" occurs when he is usurped by the odious Murdstone. David's association with Murdstone is in fact

uncertainty becomes the hallmark of his life. From here on David is forced to learn that people do not always remain constant nor do they always live up to ideals; they frequently “fall” far short of his expectations. Throughout the novel people often “do the dirty” on David and the worst offenders are the ones he loves the most: Clara, his mother; Emily, his young love; Steerforth, his esteemed friend; and Dora, his adored young wife.

As an aspiring hero David is essentially a very proud and idealistic individual who feels that people should always “do the right thing” by him. In keeping with his culture he is enormously pollution conscious. In fact dirt avoidance could to a large degree be said to constitute his nature. This is why when people fail to measure up to his ideals or don’t fit in with his notions of order he (consciously or otherwise) generally wants them dead and buried or at, the very least, out of his sight. Offending or becoming superfluous in David’s eyes is highly dangerous and generally results in one of two exceedingly punitive destinies: exile or death. Obliging enough Clara, Dora³ and Steerforth die, while Emily receives what Patricia Ingham describes as “an equally final but more human variation on death: emigration” (59).⁴ However, before these characters are completely cast aside, David invariably grants each one the dubious privilege of his manipulation of their respective images. When his mother dies he writes: “I remembered her, from that instant, only as the young mother of my earliest impressions, who had been used to wind her bright curls round and round her finger, and to dance with me at twilight in the parlour. . . . In her death she winged her way back to her calm untroubled youth, and cancelled all the rest” (186-87). When Steerforth seduces Emily David writes:

In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. Deeply as I felt my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home, I believed that if I had been brought face to face with him, I could not have uttered one reproach. . . . What his remembrances of me were, I have never known . . . but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead. (516)

characterised by repeated falls. The lessons that Murdstone subjects him to are distinguished by feelings of falling, dirtiness, degradation and victimisation (104-08).

³ According to Carl Bandelin: “Dora . . . dies, of her own free will, but also at David’s unconscious behest” (27).

⁴ David would have liked Emily to have died: “There has been a time since . . . when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em’ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning in my sight; and when I have answered Yes, it would have been” (86). Emily’s “sentence,” however, is commuted to emigration and a severe tongue lashing from the substitute punisher Rosa Dartle.

Like the sinister Duke in Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," who keeps his wife's wondrous portrait but orders her death, David treasures wonderful, controlled images of his loved ones but nonetheless sentences them to death in his mind.

Of all the crimes that elicit David's censure the major one appears to be "the pollution of an honest home." In David's psychic court of justice this above all warrants capital punishment: Clara pollutes David's home because she does not place a high enough premium on its sanctity and wilfully allows it to be devastated by an invader, Murdstone; Dora creates domestic chaos through her failure to value efficiency and order in the home;⁵ while Steerforth through his failure to value an honest "salt of the earth" home brings about its desecration with his selfish sexual rapacity. It is not simply the case that these characters value "stink." It is that, for David, they must receive the most punitive treatment because, although all three *know* that they are inherently tainted in his eyes, they still persist in their respective courses of action. Clara is well aware of David's profound disappointment in her: "My own little Davy! Is it to be hinted to me that I am wanting in affection for my precious treasure, the dearest little fellow that ever was! . . . Am I a *naughty* mama to you Davy? Am I a nasty, cruel, selfish, bad mama?" (69). Steerforth knows that he will never be the "fresh as a Daisy" exemplary gentleman that David wishes him to be: "'Daisy,' he said, with a smile—"for though that's not the name your Godfathers and Godmothers gave you, it's the name I like best to call you by—and I wish, I wish, I wish, you could give it to me!" (497). Dora knows that she will never be the consummate woman and housekeeper that David requires: "When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, 'it's only my child-wife!' When I am very disappointing, say, 'I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!' When you miss what I should like to be, and I think can never be, say, 'still my foolish child-wife loves me!' For indeed I do" (711).

Emily does not receive his harshest condemnation, however, because, although she is aware of her actions, she did not introduce Steerforth, the polluting agent, into her domestic environment. It was David himself who unwittingly allowed this foreign element to insidiously contaminate the house. Emily is therefore not completely culpable but David does blame himself to the point where he feels "the impulse . . . to go down upon my knees, and ask their pardon for the desolation I had caused" (516). It is, therefore, not only Clara, Emily, Dora and Steerforth whom David finds wanting—he also finds himself wanting. This would be enough to make any high-minded person feel soiled but David's problem is compounded because he cannot rid himself of the sense that he has been tainted by his mother's original sin. When she admits the home-wrecker Murdstone into the Copperfield home David experiences a ghastly rupture in what had appeared to be immutable: his sense of his mother's absolute and undivided love. For this he cannot forgive her and for this he will always feel contaminated by her. This is most evident when he suspects Annie Strong of betraying her husband. Perceiving guilt

⁵ David is disgusted by the dirty state of the house which is the essence of matter out of place: "He [the page] stole Dora's watch, which, like everything else belonging to us, had no particular place of its own" (759). In counselling Dora David conveys inordinate pollution anxiety: "'The fact is, my dear,' I began, 'there is contagion in us. We infect everyone about us'" (761).

to be written all over her face, David hysterically believes that she has begrimed not only the Doctor but his home and David's memories:

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 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, anymore, 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. (339)

As it turns out, Annie Strong is quite innocent of the crime that David suspects, but his reaction makes his position all too clear. The hyperbolic rhetoric of this passage can only be viewed as displaced antagonism towards his mother, for it was through her actions that David's childhood home, together with his happiness and his heart, was contaminated. When David learns that Mr Murdstone is his mother's new husband, the perfect home that he has shared with her and Peggotty becomes suspect in his eyes and his narrative takes on a deeply critical tenor. Speaking of his bedroom, he writes: "I thought of the oddest things. Of the shape of the room, of the cracks in the ceiling, of the paper on the walls, of the flaws in the window-glass making ripples and dimples on the prospect, of the washing-stand being rickety on its three legs, and having a discontented something about it, which reminded me of Mrs Gummidge under the influence of the old one" (94). The reference to Mrs Gummidge is significant because she is associated throughout with discomfort. Owing to her self-pitying moods, she consistently casts a pall over the Peggotty household, and David finds her so singularly objectionable that he wishes that the household could be cleansed of her presence: "There were moments when it would have been more agreeable, I thought if Mrs Gummidge had had a convenient apartment of her own to retire to, and had stopped there until her spirits revived" (88).

If there is one character defect that David reproaches himself most for, it is the fact that he suffers from an emotional disorder: he possesses an "undisciplined heart"; a condition he only becomes aware of after he marrying Dora. As innumerable critics

have asserted, Dora is very similar to his mother, another child-wife.⁶ It seems reasonable, then, that if David has been contaminated by a child-wife in the form of his mother he will in all probability be cursed to marry a child-wife himself—and marrying a child-wife can be a messy business. As Julia Kristeva puts it: “It is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In the light of these criteria Clara and Dora can be said to personify the abject.

The abject takes on various guises throughout the book invariably filling David with a sense of unease. The dark storeroom near Peggotty’s kitchen is abject with its disturbing mix of pungent items: “That is a place to be run past at night; for I don’t know what may be among those tubs and jars and old tea-chests, when there is nobody in there with a dimly-burning light, letting a mouldy air come out of the door, in which there is the smell of soup, pickles, pepper, candles, and coffee, all at one whiff” (62). The best parlour in David’s childhood home is abject because of its connections with the body of his father as it lay awaiting burial, and with the born-again Lazarus who, spectre-like, returns from the dead:

There is something of a doleful air about the room to me, for Peggotty has told me—I don’t know when, but apparently ages ago—about my father’s funeral, and the company having their black coats put on. One Sunday night my mother reads to Peggotty and me in there, how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. And I am so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take me out of bed, and show me the quiet churchyard out of the bedroom window, with the dead all lying in their graves at rest, below the solemn moon. (62)

Corpses, then, are very much associated with the room. For Kristeva:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper is cesspool, and death. . . . Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. . . . There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. . . . The corpse . . . is the utmost in abjection. It is death infecting life. . . . Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (3-4)

If the corpse is death infecting life—what could be more abject than a corpse in a *living* room? How significant, too, that its etymological meaning is “to fall”. Not only has David been contaminated by his mother’s “fall from grace” but he has also been contaminated by his father’s premature fall from life; and if this wasn’t bad enough he is

⁶ For example: “He chooses Dora, a weaker replica of his mother, as his wife” (Armstrong 84).

“scared stiff” at the notion of his father returning to life like Lazarus because if such a thing were to happen it would quite literally infect his life. This explains David’s confused state of fear and revulsion when Peggotty tries to explain his changed domestic circumstances: “‘Master Davy,’ said Peggotty, untying her bonnet with a shaking hand, and speaking in a breathless sort of way. ‘What do you think? You have got a Pa!’ I trembled, and turned white. Something I don’t know what, or how—connected with the grave in the churchyard, and the raising of the dead, seemed to strike me like an unwholesome wind” (92).

Kristeva claims that while abjection produces “discomfort, unease [and] dizziness” it is also true that “so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims” (10). Certainly David is fascinated by both Clara and Dora but he is also repelled by them. It is interesting that, as Kristeva puts it, “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2). If we examine David’s first thoughts regarding his mother and Dora it is apparent that he originally found them delectable. As Gail Turley Houston maintains in relation to David’s childhood garden of Eden, when David “furtively bolts the gooseberries” he metonymically consumes his mother.⁷ Correspondingly, he also consumes Dora: “I have not the least idea what we had for dinner, besides Dora. My impression is, that I dined off Dora, entirely, and sent away half-a-dozen plates untouched” (452). However, ingesting Clara and Dora is not to David’s liking. This is not surprising since according to Frazer Ward, “abjection poses, or may be made to pose, a threat to repressive social and symbolic systems” (8). These repressive social and symbolic systems are precisely the systems within which David wishes to make his mark, for by the end of the novel David is a fully paid up and highly successful masculine member of bourgeois society. While *David Copperfield* never really focuses in any detail on how this feat is achieved, it does at one point furnish David’s philosophy: “I never could have done what I have done, without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one object at a time” (671).

This philosophy shows quite clearly that David did not achieve his exalted position by immersing himself in the muddy, abject waters of intermixture, impurity, disorder and heterogeneity. Rather he achieved it through rejecting such elements and favouring instead separation, purity, order and homogenisation. These favoured elements are directly opposed to those represented by Clara and Dora, for as hybrid child-wives and inept homemakers they resist homogenisation and refuse “proper” assimilation. In this sense, they convey the disturbing, transgressive potential of the abject. While highly desirable, they nonetheless defy rigid gender constructions, disrupt the organising principle of male dominance, and draw David “toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). Thus he must psychically jettison them from his life, and Dickens, as his sympathetic creator, must enforce the purge in a material sense.

Moreover, the ejection of Clara and Dora is not enough; an even larger-scale cleanup of characters must occur before David can feel completely clean and

⁷ “As he furtively bolts the gooseberries, he also seems to consume his mother’s nutritive riches for this image, so metonymically associated with his mother, represents the female as food” (103).

rehabilitated. Consequently, in Chapter 57, Dickens stages a mass emigration: Mr Peggotty, Martha, Mrs Gummidge, Emily and the Micawbers all conveniently set sail on the same ship for Australia. Significantly, these characters are all intrinsically dirty. Mr Peggotty is dirty when David first meets him (82) and David classes him as a crustacean.⁸ As a “fallen woman” Martha is extremely dirty. At one stage Mr Peggotty refers to her in the light of dirt: “The time was, Mas’r Davy . . . when I thowt this girl, Martha, a’most like the dirt underneath my Em’ly’s feet” (745). Later Martha is compared to noxious waste: “As if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay, the girl we had followed strayed down to the river’s brink” (748). Mrs Gummidge, as mentioned earlier, is matter out of place because she pollutes the home with her wretched, self-pitying ways. Emily is directly aligned with dirt in Rosa Dartle’s eyes: ““This low girl whom he picked out of the tide-mud” (740). “The miserable vanity of these earth-worms!” (787). “This piece of pollution, picked up from the water-side, to be made much of for an hour, and then tossed back to her original place!” (788). “I thought you a broken toy that had lasted its time; a worthless spangle that was tarnished, and thrown away” (789). Finally, Mr Micawber can be viewed as dirty because he is, as G.K. Chesterton puts it, “a nuisance” who “interrupts practical life” (134). In short he gets in the way and should thereby be swept aside.

Since none of these people (all of them essentially misfits) have any valid “place” left in David’s life it seems logical to remove them. Australia is after all a perfect dumping ground for the rubbish or refuse of Victorian society, those who do not fit in with the symbolic order.⁹ G.K. Chesterton is suitably unimpressed with this mass expulsion: “I do not like the notion of David Copperfield sitting down comfortably to his tea-table with Agnes, having got rid of all the inconvenient or distressing characters of the story by sending them to the other side of the world” (132). It is quite understandable that Chesterton should feel this way. On a literal level there is something quite offensive about such a self-righteous closing vignette. However, if we dig deeper, another level of meaning can be uncovered. As we know David may be super-conscious of the dirty nature of other people, but he is also super-conscious of his own flawed state. His hands are far from clean at the end and, while he may subconsciously wish to punish others for their transgressions, he also wishes at some deep level to punish himself. The Alps scene in Chapter 58 encapsulates this need. The first thing we notice about this scene is that Dickens directly invokes Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime: “If those awful solitudes had spoken to my heart, I did not know it. I had found sublimity and wonder in the dread heights and precipices, in the roaring torrents, and the wastes of ice and snow; but as yet, they had taught me nothing else” (887). The allusion may be intentional, or Dickens may have just absorbed it through the osmotic process of reading Romantic texts which employ similar lexical arrangements. But no matter the reason, it is certainly a feature of the Alps passage and as such should be explored.

⁸ Organisms associated with scavenging debris from the bottom of the ocean floor.

⁹ “The ship on which the Peggottys sail is one containing emigrating paupers and transported criminals, mutual transgressors against the state and society” (Lougy 49-50).

Turning to Edmund Burke's treatise on the Sublime we find that the Sublime elicits very strong emotions, the chief amongst them being Astonishment, "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror" (57). As Agnes is very much associated with the Alps, I would like to argue that Astonishment is the prevailing emotion that David feels towards her. There are many statements made by David throughout the book that corroborate this assertion. David is at all times very much in awe of Agnes; he is daunted and even paralysed by her power: "There is no one that I know of, who deserves to love you, Agnes" and "You are like no one else. You are so good . . . you are always right" (333). "All my life long I shall look up to you, and be guided by you" (916). According to Burke the sublime is also an important element of power: "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power" (64). This is a quality with which Agnes is assuredly endowed: as David's words attest, she is omnipotent, totally good and always right. As her letter confirms, she is also all-knowing: "*She knew* (she said) how such a nature as mine would turn affliction to good. *She knew* how trial and emotion would exalt and strengthen it. *She was sure* that in my every purpose I should gain a firmer and a higher tendency. . . . She . . . *well knew* that I would labour on. *She knew* that in me, sorrow could not be weakness, but must be strength" (888, emphasis added). Agnes is also omnipresent: "She . . . was always at my side go where I would" (888). She even apparently creates David: "What should I have been without you" (936). "What I am, you have made me Agnes" (916).

There is, however, one quality of the sublime that Agnes doesn't seem to possess: she is not associated with darkness. Burke claims that "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light" (80). As we know Agnes is not exactly imbued with darkness, shining as she does "like a Heavenly light" above and beyond all objects (950). Nevertheless Agnes's brand of light may still be perceived as sublime because for Burke some light "by its very excess is converted into a species of darkness" (80). This is certainly true of Agnes because, being so pure and clean, she effectively overcomes David's organs of sight. As Aunt Betsey knows, David is "blind, blind blind" to Agnes (565).

According to Burke the Sublime is generally cloaked in obscurity: "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread" (58-59). If there is one character in *David Copperfield* who can be said to be obscure it must surely be Agnes; the reader never really gets a strong sense of her physically. In fact she is so shrouded in abstractions that she just about floats off the page. Virginia Woolf claims that "[Dickens] has the visualising power in the extreme. His people are branded upon our eyeballs before we hear them speak" (83). However, as Philip Collins points out, this is decidedly not the case with Agnes: "unlike Dora, she is not visualised: Dora has that delightful 'shape' and pretty hair, Agnes merely has sides against which her keys hang, and the adjectives about her all refer to her disposition and moral qualities" (48).

As is made all too evident David consistently admires Agnes's moral qualities: she is a fountain of strength. Despite all the odds her love for David never wavers. David states at one point: "I had always felt my weakness in comparison with her constancy and fortitude" (890). According to Burke, "those virtues which cause admiration and are of the sublimer kind, produce terror rather than love. Such as fortitude, justice, wisdom and the like. . . . We submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance" (110-13). Isn't this just what happens to David? For well over 800 pages he avoids perceiving Agnes in anything other than a platonic light. In the Alps, however, when cleansed of all the dirty, recalcitrant elements that have beset his life, he miraculously realises his "love" for her. Nevertheless, even after admitting it, he stays away from her and remains in Switzerland to write fiction and commune with nature. He also spends his time rationalising away the possibility of returning to be with her: "She was not mine—she was never to be mine. She might have been, but that was past!" (891). In all he is away from her for three years. This is not the route a man in love would take. It is instead the route of someone who is scared. And David *is* scared. He is scared above all of embracing purity, betraying his mother, and freezing to death.

Mary Douglas claims that "purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise" (162). Agnes, like the Alps, is immutable, pristine, unambiguous and uncompromising. Never untidy in her affections or her modes of domestic conduct, she is the absolute antithesis of David's mother. David unconsciously knows that to marry Agnes is to dissolve the image of his mother and replace it with something far less vital—a frozen ideal which will discipline his heart but not satiate his hunger. Marrying Agnes is then a form of punishment. Death may be the punishment meted out to his mother, Dora, and Steerforth, and asexual exile may be the punishment meted out to Emily, but David does not spare himself. His punishment is a conflation of these destinies. David of course does not actually die or experience asexual exile but the conclusion of the book suggests something akin to these states. At the end most of the people who have been so much a part of David's life are removed in some way or another and his island-like marriage to Agnes, as fecund as it appears to be (producing three children), could in another light be viewed as a kind of asexual death-in-life. After all, David appears to feel little or no desire for Agnes—even when he proposes to her he perversely adheres to his old mode of address and calls her "sister." So too, while the domestic competence or purity that she evinces may herald peace, it does not convince us in terms of true happiness.

Certainly it could be argued that this is what David wanted all along, particularly with the passage where he appears to crave death-in-mind. When his mother dies, he claims that "the mother who lay in the grave, was the mother of my infancy, the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed for ever on her bosom" (187). But while David can be said to crave death he cannot be said to crave a death-in-life; this is why he unconsciously chooses such a punishment, for mere death would be the easy way out—it would not discipline him strongly enough.

In the Second Book of *Little Dorrit* there is another Alps scene, where the travellers come upon an exhibit in a grated house containing a ghastly trio of previous travellers who had frozen to death upon the Great Saint Bernard mountain: "The mother, storm-belated many winters ago, still standing in the corner with her baby at her breast; the man who had frozen with his arm raised to his mouth in fear or hunger, still pressing it with his dry lips after years and years. An awful company, mysteriously come together" (484). While this image bears no relation to *David Copperfield* it does provide an apt metaphor for David's state at the end of the novel. Arguably David at heart needs a real woman like his mother to cling to—one who is changeable, ambiguous and at times compromising. However, because he cannot come to terms with the impure nature of such a woman, he embraces instead the mountainous abstract breast that is Agnes and as a result condemns himself to a static life of emotional deprivation.

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