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*The apogee of the novel in nineteenth-century England*<sup>1</sup>

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In the early eighteenth century, the modern sense of realism gave shape to a new literary genre – the novel. As discussed by Ian Watt in “Realism and the novel form”<sup>2</sup>, Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding are considered to be the first important novelists in England, since they started to incorporate a new perception of reality in their fiction. However, it is only from the nineteenth century onwards that the novel reaches its apogee.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, English novelist Charles Dickens publishes his favorite work: *David Copperfield* (1850). The novel presents a narrator who chronologically tells the story of his own life, from his birth to his adulthood. The strong sense of realism present in this novel combined with some similar events in Dickens’ own life led many literary critics to state that *David Copperfield* is the story of the author himself, in the form of a fictional autobiography. However, realism is the very essence of the novel and we cannot ignore that originality is a central aspect of it. Therefore, the plot develops according to the author’s senses, which means to say that the plot is not a predictable repertoire of human experiences.

In this sense, Ian Watt discusses how ‘formal realism’ differentiates the novel from previous fictional genres. ‘Formal realism’ is explained by Watt as the “sum of literary techniques whereby the novel” imitates human life<sup>3</sup>. According to him, constant transformations flourishing in the English society provided the favorable conditions for the rise of the novel. Such social changes were much influenced by philosophical ideas which started to question old values focused on universal and dogmatic truths, towards a new perspective in which reality is conceived as individual and particular. This perception of reality pervades Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* to the extent that all aspects of Watt’s concept of formal realism are fully expressed in this novel, creating the impression of a real account of life experience.

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<sup>1</sup> This text was written as part of the evaluation for the subject “Romance e representação da sociedade” taught by Maria Eulália Ramicelli in the first semester 2011.

<sup>2</sup> WATT, Ian. Realism and the Novel Form. In: *The rise of the Novel*. London: Pimlico, 2000. pp.9-34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

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The focus on the individual can be perceived in terms of character's authenticity and through the use of proper and complete names, which are not only suggestive but also sound authentic; for example, the moment in the narrative in which Betsey Trotwood creates a correspondence between Mr. Murdstone's name and its similarity to *murder* stone. Moreover, the relation between character and setting is another interesting point once minutely detailed description of different places is provided as the character moves around them. We can perceive that places chosen to be described are strictly related to those which are relevant in the journey made by the main character, Copperfield. In fact, Copperfield's perspective is the only one that the reader has access to. However, the sense of realism is so pervasive that the readers feel as if they were in the story, which allows them to build opinions about events and characters which may be different from Copperfield's.

In terms of plot, every event develops according to a causal connection. For instance, as soon as Copperfield's mother dies, the protagonist is sent to work in 'Murdstone and Grinby', and at the same time his beloved nurse Peggotty is fired of the house. Consequently, this succession of events opens the way to another perspective in David Copperfield's life, which changes completely and comprises different and new experiences.

The use of objective and referential language also expresses a strong sense of realism in this novel. For example, when Copperfield arrives at his aunt's house, he describes the place as follows: "[...] I saw the old-fashioned furniture brightly rubbed and polished, my aunt's inviolable chair and table by the round green fan in the bow window, the drugget-covered carpet, the cat, the kettle-holder, two canaries, the old china, the punch owl full of dried rose-leaves [...]". In this excerpt, the presence of several adjectives such as *old-fashioned*, *rubbed*, *polished*, *round green*, *drugget-covered* and *dried* illustrates the use of detailed description that makes readers feel as if they could really see the place. Besides, the type of language varies according to the character who uses it, in terms of slang and accent. For instance, the reader is able to contrast the Peggotties' working-class speech to the Copperfields' standard English. In fact, this contrast between the language used by representatives of upper classes, such as the Copperfields and the Murdstones, and the one used by the characters who have lower positions, such as the servant Peggotty, can be noticed along the whole narrative. Hence, the narrative displays how Dickens successfully employs language to express its factual registers and, consequently, emphasize colloquialism and approximate the language used in his novel to everyday language usage.

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*David Copperfield* also conveys a strong sense of realism through the author's thematic choices. As a matter of fact, the moral virtues highly appreciated by the Victorian upper and middle-classes, who were the essential target readers of literary fiction at the time, are explicitly valued by the novel's protagonist. Virtues such as respectability, responsibility, seriousness, and specially earnestness, associated to hard work, are considered by Copperfield to be the means through which he is finally successful. As Copperfield himself mentions, the source of his success can be found in his "punctuality, order, diligence". In this sense, he states: "[...] whatever I have tried to do in life I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely", "[...] in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest[...]" In fact, for Copperfield, his success came gradually, as he claims to himself: "Never to put on hand on anything, on which I could not throw my whole self; and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was [...]". In fact, as Richard Altick<sup>4</sup> observes, social orientation is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Victorian literature, and Copperfield's way of life perfectly suits to this purpose.

Furthermore, another characteristic of the Victorian period is social mobility, which was a consequence of the rise of the bourgeoisie. This aspect is well illustrated by the protagonist's whole life. Indeed, Copperfield is born into a middle-class family, but his life goes through several economic ups and downs before he reaches financial, social and emotional stability.

To sum up, *David Copperfield* can be seen as a complete materialization of 'formal realism', which gradually started to be explored in the eighteenth century with Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, but achieved its fullness in the nineteenth-century fictional narrative. By seeking to convey a realistic sense of verisimilitude from the very beginning to the end of his novel, Dickens materializes and anticipates in practice – both in terms of theme and structure – what Ian Watt later develops in theory.

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<sup>4</sup> ALTICK, Richard. Victorians: Actors and Audience. In: *Victorian People and Ideas*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973. pp. 17-72.