
*The representation of lived experience*¹
Manipulation of time in *David Copperfield*

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First published in 1850, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* portrays social, economic, political and ideological aspects of an important period in England marked by intense changes: the Victorian period. Along the story, David Copperfield, the narrator/protagonist, faces different situations in the course of his life that are closely connected to the real experience of this period when the English people became aware that they were not prepared to cope with all the changes that affected their lives both in micro and macro levels, such as urbanization, industrialization, development of means of transportation, communication, and so on. In this sense, *David Copperfield*, as a novel, offers an overview of these movements that gradually altered the English context during the nineteenth century.

In order to understand how Victorian life experience is materialized in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, one can consider Bakhtin's argumentation about the "plastic possibilities" (BAKHTIN, 1996, p. 3) that the novel offers in order to represent everyday experience. According to this author, as the novel is "an ever-developing genre", it presents different structural elements (plot, character, time, setting, language) which are not fixed. In fact, these elements present a movement or fluidity that allows for the organization and reorganization of the narrative according to the flux of life that is being represented. In *David Copperfield*, one of these elements that has a central role in the (re)organization of the narrative is time. In other words, time is a narrative element that is manipulated by the author in order to shed light or cast shadow on specific experiences faced by the protagonist.

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The manipulation of time in Dickens' *David Copperfield* is a surprising aspect. In the article "Realismo e estória romanesca", Sandra Vasconcelos asserts that "a noção de tempo carrega em si a possibilidade do aprendizado por meio da experiência, a chance de mudança, de amadurecimento" (VASCONCELOS, 2002, p. 40). The passage below illustrates how the notion of time seems to work in the novel:

The room was as neat as Janet or my aunt. As I laid down my pen, a moment since, to think of it, the air from the sea came blowing in again, mixed with the perfume of the flowers; and 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, the two canaries, the old china, the punchbowl full of dried rose-leaves, the tall press guarding all sorts of bottles and pots, and, wonderfully out of keeping with the rest, my dusty self upon the sofa, taking note of everything. (p. 168)

In this descriptive passage, there is a superposition of two different times, once the adult narrator, David Copperfield, moves away from his present time of narration into his own previous time as a child narrator. By doing so, the present and past of the narration are mixed together in order to intensify the experiences of the character; experiences that are recollections, but become as vivid as his present life. Such manipulation of time is strongly explored by Dickens along the novel as a narrative technique that allows him to imprint a realistic perception of human experience in the formation of David's personal identity. In this sense, David Copperfield's personal identity works as a conscious identity built through time once his recollections become the central element of the narrative. As Vasconcelos explains,

A memória, ao possibilitar a noção da cadeia de causa e efeito que constitui o eu, permite explorar a personalidade tal como ela se define na interpenetração de suas autopercepções passada e presente. (VASCONCELOS, 2002, p. 75)

In fact, just like other nineteenth-century novels, *David Copperfield* focuses on the representation of "all the varieties of human experience" (WATT, 2000, p. 11) in such a way that this representation seems to be close to real life. In this sense, time operates as an important element of the narrated events in order to generate an effect of "time oscillation" between time of narration and time of the narrative (FLINT, 2006, p. 34).

The circumstances experienced by David along his life, which he presents as an autobiographical report, are sequenced according to two interconnected temporal variables: a chronological perspective and a psychological one. . The story opens with the narration of his birth – indeed, hours before his birth - and advances in time as he grows into childhood, adolescence and adulthood. By supporting the chronological sequence of events, the psychological narration changes events into personal experiences. For this reason, these chronological events can sometimes be situated in the narrative in a timeline vaguely indicated by non-specific time references such as “one night”, “next day”. When the events have significant value for the character’s particular experience they are highlighted through more specific time references such as “We had started from Yarmouth at three o'clock in the afternoon, and we were due in London about eight next morning” (p. 68).As a matter of fact, as Copperfield narrates his own course of life, he makes a selection of moments of time which are either emphasized or suppressed from the narrative. It is the case of some events announced in chapter eight, which are suppressed in chapter 9 – “I remember nothing” (p. 110). The narrator justifies the sentence by claiming that “the great remembrance [his friendship with Steerforth] by which that time [the time between what happened at school and his birthday] is marked in my mind seems to have swallowed up all lesser recollections and to exist alone” (p. 110). By leaving out certain periods of time, other meaningful events are put in evidence, such as David’s admiration for and friendship with his colleague Steerforth during a difficult period in the Salen House.

Towards the end of the narrative, the protagonist affirms that “there was that jumble in my thoughts and recollections, that I had lost the clear arrangement of time and distance” (p. 645). This passage illustrates what Benedito Nunes (2000, p. 25) characterizes as “fases interrompidas, momentos suspensos, períodos vazios” in the individual’s memory about events in his own life that are linguistically rearranged in order to establish connections between some past and present fragmented events. In fact, as Nunes argues in his discussion about psychological time, in *David Copperfield* these fragmented events, “[se compõem] de momentos imprecisos, que se aproximam ou tendem a fundir-se” (2000, p. 19) and, therefore, create an effect of realism in the narrative once, along David’s narration of his own life, psychological time organizes lived experiences, that is, David’s memory randomly manipulatestemporal fragments that become personally meaningful as they organize his comprehension of himself.

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