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Elisions of Cholera and Class in *David Copperfield*

Mary Kai Patterson

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

Rae X. Yan, Department of English

Abstract

This study examines Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* (1850) in terms of cholera epidemics that dramatically shaped Victorian discourse on disease and responsibility. As a prominent public figure, Dickens participated in discussions of sanitation reform and legislation. However, he evaded specific discussion of disease within *David Copperfield* despite the novel's publication amidst both the passing of the Public Health Act of 1848 and a second cholera outbreak in London. This article argues that Dickens presents disease as an "unspeakable subject" incommensurate with Victorian understandings of cleanliness, propriety, and maintaining the untouchability of the upper classes. Both Dickens and David cleanse all traces of disease to disavow a confrontation of equally uncomfortable subjects, predominately the class inequities and social determinants of health unearthed by the cholera epidemics. An analysis of two major characters demonstrate the unspoken presence of disease in the novel and a preserved prejudice against "filthy" lower-class people.

Keywords: Public Health Act of 1848, cholera, social class, elisions

Introduction

Charles Dickens's 1850 novel *David Copperfield* is largely read within the confines of its autobiographical-fiction identity. The bildungsroman covers over 20 years of David's life, detailing his childhood as an orphan, legal career, marriages, and ongoing rivalry with his peer, Uriah Heep. Scholars draw parallels between David's retrospective narration and Dickens's own life, justifying scholar's distinction of the narrative's more domestic plotlines from the satirical, social commentary of his other influential works. Chris R. Vanden Bossche argues that the novel is constrained to "the realm of the domestic and private" (Bossche, 1986, 106). John O. Jordan notes the absence of an "angry social voice," adding to the novel's repression of "social themes" (Jordan, 1985, p. 63). Julia Kuehn further observes that David exercises "powers of distance" that allows detachment from social matters (Kuehn, 2018, p. 21). These claims may be justified given how, despite Dickens's keen awareness of the 1848 cholera epidemic and his active

participation in sanitation reform during *David Copperfield*'s creation, difficult socio-political discussions are oddly elided, particularly those pertaining to contagion. The omission of conversations acknowledging disease's ties with established socio-economic landscapes, whether in the context of literature or public policy, function to uphold misconceptions regarding illness and lower-class people.

Undoubtedly, health and contagion remain difficult subjects of conversation because they expose weaknesses both within the human body and society. As Pamela K. Gilbert discusses in *Cholera and Nation: Doctoring the Social Body in Victorian England*, the "advent of epidemic disease" lends "both focus and urgency to [an] understanding of the social body," a collective body that "can suffer ills" just as its afflicted members do (Gilbert, 2008, p. 5). The novel evades specific discussions of disease by avoiding mention of the development, progression, and consequences of disease when the subject was ubiquitous amidst the 1848 cholera epidemic. The cholera epidemics that repeatedly beset England in 1831 and again in 1848 were not only terrifying for their recurrence, but for the dreadful array of cardinal symptoms that accompanied each fatal infection. Killing 14,600 London residents from 1848 to 1849, causing over 6 deaths per 1,000 people, cholera was rightfully an unspeakable horror—particularly when outbreaks were so sudden (Koch, 2017, p. 82). As Chung-Jen Chen remarks in *Victorian Contagion: Risk and Social Control in the Victorian Literary Imagination*, sanitationists tended to operate "on the assumption that all possible disease could be prevented…if the living environment were kept clean [and] healthy," which eventually led to a mindset that criminalized "tangible and imaginary filth" (Chen 2019, p. 9). The sanitationist Edwin Chadwick popularized these ideologies and viewed "the unhealthy diet, indulgent life habits, sloppy work attitude, and filthy jobs of the working poor as a 'moral disease,'" tying inescapable determinants of health to moral degeneracies (Chen 2019, p. 67). Chen argues that Dickens's novels tend to "subvert sanitationist ideology" popularized by Chadwick with "rich sensuous descriptions meant to elicit the reader's sympathy" (Chen, 2019, p. 112). Yet Dickens "listened with enthusiasm" to Chadwick's testimonies and helped "inspire Dickens's own [fictional] narratives" of the poor (Chen, 2019, p. 52). In *David Copperfield,* the title character consequentially adopts the flawed logic of sanitation reformers in his dealing with members of the working class who do not fit a socially acceptable mold.

Contagion indirectly permeates David's narration, as David often thinks about illness only to deliberately internalize these thoughts. In the rare moments where illness does drive the plot, unspecific language replaces measurable disease terminology. Descriptions of fading or slipping away void of unpleasant symptoms, for example, replace death by illness. This article takes the position that David ultimately projects his perception of disease as an "unspeakable" subject without ever discussing contagion or health conditions directly. He relies on illness as a metaphor to discuss the equally unspeakable subject of class inequalities, bringing attention to how social conditions shape understanding of disease. Two primary plot points illustrate these inverted applications of vocabulary: Dora's death and David's descriptions of Uriah Heep where David and Dickens literalizes the phrase "avoid it like the plague" while still permitting disease's perpetual, lingering presence. In these cases, contagion terminology describes intangible "transmissions" of distress that pass from one body to another, exposing how Victorian social and class conventions determine encounters with disease.

"There's contagion in us": Dora Spendlow's Degeneration into Mrs. Copperfield

David describes the unexplained weakness, illness, and consequential death of his wife Dora in suspiciously vague and figurative language, perpetuating the Victorian association of lower-class people with inferiority and disease as he traces the Copperfields' pecuniary difficulties. Dora's illness spans several chapters of *David Copperfield,* but David omits all information regarding her steady decline, including evidence of any attempted medical interventions. David first mentions "how easily" he carries "Dora up and down stairs," then how his aunt constantly attends to Dora who "was not strong," and later explains that her feet had become "dull and motionless" (Dickens, 1850/2008, p. 681). Dora's inability to walk, perhaps caused by general weakness or a more localized loss of mobility, points to anatomical etiology. David's frequent mentioning of his wife's weakness without reference to a causal ailment aligns with the mentality of early public health surveillance "that scrutinized the body but was unable or unwilling to see the viruses within" (Chen, 2019, p. 229). David not only shields the reader from Dora's specific diagnosis, but avoids acknowledging the tragedy of her supposedly inevitable, premature death altogether.

David's reluctance to speak about Dora from her first symptoms of weakness to the height of her illness causes her death to stand out from others' as oddly vague and fantastical. Before referencing Dora's wavering strength, David alludes to "a baby-smile upon her breast" that "was

not meant to be," prompting readers to think about the emotional and health complications surrounding a miscarriage (Dickens, 1850, p. 679). Understandably, David departs from plain language in his allusion to a subject equally or perhaps more distressing than disease; doing so preserves the intimacy surrounding a woman's body, death, grief, and emotional and physical pain. There seems, however, to be an additional component to Dora's malaise suggested by the clement nature of her passing.

The ambiguity surrounding Dora's death aligns with the novel's tendency to generalize discussing disease. Dora's gradual, seemingly painless death, that only seems to accentuate her beauty and femininity adhere to the novel's use of literary conventions surrounding death by diseases like tuberculosis. Mr. Barkis, a character understood by readers to die from consumption, dies a comparable, gentle death. David simply states that the man "went out with the tide" to avoid naming Mr. Barkis' specific diagnosis (Dickens, 1850, p. 434). "Saintly sufferings" and "ethereal deaths" were understood as consumptive to nineteenth-century readers well acquainted with the convention of alluding to diseases with palliative imagery (Caldwell, 2011, p. 294). Perhaps the deadly disease claims another life in *David Copperfield*, providing justification for Dora's otherwise "random" death. The ambiguity behind these ultimately unnamed diseases provokes contemplation of the cholera epidemic, ascribed to the lower classes, actively raging outside of the novel's realm. Dora's sudden weakness may serve as a euphemism for the rapid collapse and violent vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration characteristic of cholera. Dickens distances fatal disease in the narrative from the horrific realities of cholera, allowing his characters to die as unprovokingly as possible.

Unspeakable Horrors: An Unwillingness to Discuss Contagion and Class

David's oversimplification of his wife's death conspicuously correlates with Dora's decline in social status. While the timeline of Dora's illness does not include specific markers, David casually mentions Dora's waning strength not long after her final attempts at a lower-class wife's responsibilities. A former gentleman's daughter now on her deathbed as a beggar's wife, Dora confesses that she was too young and frail for a wife's duties, but what she cannot admit is her unsuitability for a poor wife's duties. David describes her inability to labor and support her husband as a blight on the domestic home. The repercussions of Dora's fallen social station extends to the entire household, spreading to David as well as the servants that share their living

space. David tells Dora, "'there is contagion in us. We infect everyone about us'" in reference to their inability to discipline their household staff and maintain a proper home (Dickens, 1850, p. 674). In response, Dora wonders "with all her might whether [he] was going to propose any new kind of vaccination, or other medical remedy, for this unwholesome state" of theirs (Dickens, 1850, p. 674). Understanding disease's association with the mistreatment of the working class as a causal relationship, Dora conceptualizes herself as infected with a contagion of economic and social disarray.

Dora perceives her poverty as a state of misery so wholeheartedly that she experiences somatic symptoms of illness. When visiting a former servant in prison, she faints as if merely breathing the air of "low society" makes her physically ill. Dora is so repulsed by poverty that her body rejects it. When David informs Dora of his sudden loss in fortune, she responds with a fit of hysteria that causes her knees to buckle. She commands David, "don't talk about being poor, and working hard!" and wails over the burden of managing accounts and reading cookbooks (Dickens, 1850, p. 525). Her phobic reaction to the mere prospect of poverty caused David to think "he had killed her" (Dickens, 1850, p. 526). Dora, who often communicates through an expression of her dog's "thoughts," also says, "Jip must have a mutton-chop every day at twelve, or he'll die!" (Dickens, 1850, p. 525). In so doing, Dora foretells her own susceptibility to environments void of luxury, conditions to which her body was not priorly exposed. While she is prepared to withstand the responsibilities of a wealthy "child-wife," Jip and Dora are so unfit for an environment of labor that they gradually succumb to the symptoms of poverty.

Dora's fear of descending into 'low society' is justly confirmed by how David treats her following her decline in social status. Just as the governing classes often dehumanized the working class, David objectifies Dora during this period. David's perception of Dora as a helpless, futile object resonates with Chadwick's depictions of the poor in his *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*. Chadwick's sanitationist ideology painted the working classes as "not quite human" as no "true human beings" could live amongst such "disgraceful" filth and disease[1] (Chen, 2019, p. 68). David comparably diminishes

[1] This reduction of lower-class individuals to nonliving things conveniently justifies overlooking conditions of poverty.

Dora's personhood by objectifying her as a fragile flower. Betsey Trotwood, David's Aunt, coins Dora's nickname "Blossom" only after the Copperfield's marriage, indicating that Dora's physical and social decline occur simultaneously. In the early stages of Dora's illness, David reflects on Dora's nickname, writing "what a fatal name it was!" (Dickens, 1850, p. 681). David associates Dora's delicateness with an unspoken expectation of premature death, as if to justify his inability to provide rationale for her fatal illness. To David, it is only natural that Dora should pass, because she has proven herself "useless" in her social role as a wife and unable to labor as a member of the lower class. David parts with a petaled corpse instead of his wife, demonstrated in his referral to Dora as "it" upon her death hour. Her gradual death is as anticipated as it is palatable, particularly because Dora loses her ability to display distress, frustration, or other emotions as she transforms into an inanimate flower. Dora seems to welcome her own death; and while David feels genuine sorrow as his Little Blossom "flutters to the ground," the death of a flower is of little consequence to its admirers, as its beauty is replaceable (Dickens, 1850, p. 745).

The death of Dora, a woman reduced in circumstances, and that of Mr. Barkis sharply contrast the plot-driving deaths of men of consequence. Upper-class men in *David Copperfield* die sensationally, as if only a borderline fictitious event could remove these men from a narrative that underscores the upper class's dominating presence. Perhaps it seems unlikely that men with socioeconomic leverage, such as Mr. Spendlow and Steerforth, could possess susceptibilities to disease or prolonged, suffering deaths. David describes his "shock" learning about Mr. Spenlow's fatal carriage accident and ponders the "appalling vacancy" that exists without the gentleman's presence (Dickens, 1850, p. 541). Steerforth's death "agitates" and "fatigues" David, causing him to cry and his voice faulter as he grieves the loss of his social idol (Dickens, 1850, p. 777). Sudden deaths from shipwrecks and carriage accidents, considered quite shocking events in Victorian literature, are matters to which David *can* speak directly. David reflects on the profundity of both gentlemen's deaths, but he does not contemplate the tragedy of the working-class man, Ham, who sacrifices himself to save Steerforth. Instead, David grieves the man who grossly betrays Ham and his fiancé.

This discrepancy between the treatment of lower and upper-class characters reflects David's general quietude regarding issues of injustice and class disparities. The lives of Steerforth and

Spendlow remain significant after death, while Dora—and even Barcus and Ham—are eliminated from the narrative once they serve their plot purpose. Lower-class characters are treated as one-dimensional and as having few, exhaustible attributes. It seems that only something out of the ordinary, such as the sudden death of an upper-class man, can provoke David into rumination. David's role in representing the middle class makes his complacency in matters of social injustice even more troubling. David witnesses, and serves as an active agent in, severe and even disturbing instances of abuse and manipulation. David's lack of self-criticism comes forth when he not only avoids confronting perpetrators of injustice but does not directly sympathize with those taken advantage of. David even positions himself as an enemy of class mobility embodied by Uriah Heep.

"Preventatives" of the Rising, Middle-Class Man

David constantly distances himself from Uriah's corporeal sickliness and vocality about socially unspeakable matters, positioning David in opposition to the advancing lower-middle class that Uriah represents. While Uriah's skeletal frame, "sleepless" red eyes, and "pale face" resembles those of a corpse[2], these symptoms also signify a cholera infection (Dickens, 1850, p. 213). Research conducted on cholera's pathology in the mid-1800's frequently document "sunken" and "injected eyes" (Parkes, 1847, p. 225). Uriah's choleric appearance repels David and his mere presence, speech, and "writhing" movements repulse David so intensely that he maintains physical space between himself and Uriah. Uriah's tendency to jerk and "convulse like a fish" mirrors the spasmodic movements of a cholera victim's body "several hours after apparent death" (Chadwick, 1843, p. 87). Extremely pale skin was also synonymous with "the blue death." Uriah's pale skin and "red sun" eyes seem to be interconnected symptoms, as David's mother shares these dual symptoms of "very pale and with red eyes" not long before her own death (Dickens, 1850, p. 59). Mrs. Creakle tells David in succession that his mother was "very ill" in the morning, "dangerously ill," then "dead," possibly suggesting that David's mother fell victim to a deadly disease with a rapid, ravaging course, like cholera, that turns lethal in a single day (Dickens, 1850, p. 117-118). Cholera "provoked violent diarrhea, rapid

[2] David Thiele argues in his article "The Transcendent and Immortal…HEEP!': Class Consciousness, Narrative Authority, and the Gothic in *David Copperfield*" that Uriah resembles a cadaver, pointing to his "social role as corrosive upstart" and leading to his "social death" (Thiele, 2000).

dehydration, and circulatory collapse" and killed approximately "half of its victims—often within days," or in severe cases, "within the span of a single day" (Caldwell, 2011, p. 292). David fears his own susceptibility to these symptoms and takes preventative measures to avoid suffering as both his mother and Uriah have suffered.

David, a lower-class man pursuing social ascension like Uriah, wishes to erase all traces to his counterpart who rises in an alternative, more conniving way disapproved of by the upper class. David, along with Rosa Dartle, use sanitation techniques to subdue "problematic" members of the lower classes, such as Uriah and Little Emily. A working-class orphan whose relatives work in the fishing industry, Emily openly discusses her dissatisfaction with her lower social station—transgressions Rosa finds "sickly." Rosa declares, "I will have [the air] cleared; I will have it purified of you" (Dickens, 1850, p. 702). David similarly reports physical prodromes of feeling "uneasy" and "unsteady" while in a shared space with the unctuous Uriah that fuels David's paranoia of "contagious" residuals. David immediately wipes his hand clean after shaking Uriah's icy hand to remove any "contaminants" exchanged through contact; he melodramatically describes rubbing his hand "afterwards to warm it, AND TO RUB HIS OFF" (Dickens, 1850, p. 219). David seems convinced that Uriah's condition can potentially infect him through fomites and physical contact. David also insinuates that Uriah's "disease" circulates via aerosol transmission. After Uriah leaves David's apartment, David charges "Mrs. Crupp with particular directions to leave the windows open" so that his "sitting-room might be aired, and purged of [Uriah's] presence" (Dickens, 1850, p. 374). David aerates all traces of Uriah that linger behind in an effort to repurify his living space. David and Rosa's fear and ignorance regarding disease and lower-class people spur a panicked, reflexive response that proves ineffective. Throwing open shutters and windows does no more to interfere with cholera's fecal-oral transmission route than it does to erase the existence of a lower-class person.

These efforts are often overwhelmed by a sense of trepidation that simultaneously drives and douses David's purification efforts. David restates these anxieties when he delineates "the strange feeling…that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next, took possession of me" (Dickens, 1850, p. 371). David's ruminations on Uriah reveal anxiety speaking directly to endemic disease, a force he feels powerless against. He dreads the inevitable reoccurrence of contagion because it is a subject that people, like

himself in the case of Dora's death, refuse to discuss and are thus doomed to reencounter. The societal problems related to disease are perpetual *because* people avoid productive discussions regarding disease and the rampant social injustices these outbreaks resurface.

Uriah's movement and strategy for social advancement evoke the ways in which contagion inconspicuously spreads. Uriah's gradual control over the law office is invisible until Mr. Wickfield and Mr. Micawber appear visibly drained and depressed. Uriah, not unlike the *Vibrio cholerae* bacteria, uses Mr. Wickfield and Mr. Micawber as a "host" for parasitic benefit. Uriah moves in an unsuspecting fashion (through flattery and his self-proclaimed 'umbleness'), so that the extent of his manipulation is only evident once symptoms present. Uriah's "spreading influence" is made especially dangerous with its ability to "transmit" upon contact with an "infected" individual. Mrs. Micawber writes to David expressing concern for her husband's altered temperament caused by his recent employment under Heep. She signs her letter "Your afflicted EMMA MICAWBER" as if Uriah's "disease" has spread from Uriah to her husband and finally to herself (Dickens, 1850, p. 609). Mr. Wickfield, after suffering under Uriah's control for years, admits "I have infected everything I touched. I have brought misery on what I dearly love" (Dickens, 1850, p. 561). Uriah's direct manipulation of just two people proliferates into incredible stress and sorrow for those in contact with these individuals. The silent sufferings of those infected feels significant, as it takes Mr. Micawber's dramatic interference to "purge" the Wickfield's home of the Heeps' "disease" (Dickens, 1850, p. 762). Mr. Micawber's vocal indictment and banishment of Uriah, as heroic as John Snow's removal of the Broadstreet pump with an axe, breaks the silent acceptance of Uriah's uninterrupted corruption. The novel suggests that forthright conversations are essential in disrupting ongoing oppressions and encourages more direct conversations about the social prejudices that feed into choleric discourse.

Conclusion

As with Dora, David's choice of disease terminology to communicate his anxieties about Uriah mirrors the Victorian association of lower-class populations with contagious disease. Chadwick and other public health leaders believed that the working classes' immorality and ignorance bred cholera and other contagions, conceptualizing disease as tied to human spheres rather than biological. His "findings" tethered the poor's identity to their experiences of disease so closely that the two became equivocal: the working class, in their eyes, *were* disease.

Nevertheless, Chadwick's sanitary report instigated the proposal of a bill that later became the monumental Public Health Act of 1848. This legislation stands in history as a public health milestone and is taught as such in coursework, yet its basis in encoding class disparities is often omitted from the narrative. Although incredibly important for establishing public health as a government responsibility, the Act was built on biased observations posed as data and prejudices about the working class that contradicted available scientific evidence. David's inhumane treatment of characters like Dora and Uriah exposes how such moments of progress are often tainted with inhumanity and that accepting bowdlerized narratives only ensures that bigotry will repeatedly shape literature, history, and legislation.

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