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Victorian Literature

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First Impressions: Phrenology and Physiognomy in *David Copperfield*

As the Industrial Revolution came to a close, the Victorians introduced the world to their ways of thinking, including their understanding of how the mind works. Physiognomy and phrenology are what are now known as pseudosciences, but during the Victorian era, they were taken as seriously as the laws of physics are today. References to both were made throughout the artifacts they left behind, including novels such as *David Copperfield*. Originally published in 1850 by Charles Dickens, one of the most famous authors of the era, the novel follows the title character from childhood to adulthood, meeting a plethora of intriguing individuals along the way. David Copperfield spends a significant portion of the novel pointing out various characters' appearances as a way of illustrating his feelings towards them, just as the Victorians used phrenology and physiognomy to judge whomever they encountered. Because these judgments turned out to be wrong a majority of the time, people had (and still have) a tendency to make negative impressions upon meeting someone who appeared unsuitable to them.

From the very beginning, David is unnerved by Uriah Heep, the apprentice of one of David's guardians, Mr. Wickfield. He is not sure at first whether or not he likes the teenager (at the time, Uriah was fifteen), and has a peculiar fascination with him. The eleven-year-old's introduction to him is rather unsettling: "it made me uncomfortable to observe that...his sleepless eyes....like two red suns, [would] stealthily stare at me for I dare say a whole minute at a time, during which his pen went, or pretended to go, as cleverly as ever" (Dickens 231). To be

stared at by anyone is bothersome, but with eyes like that sneakily glancing at David over a piece of paper, it is certainly enough to unnerve him. Uriah is doing nothing malicious, only watching him, but his appearance gives David the impression that he is someone he should avoid interacting with as much as possible. This sets the tone of how the reader should interpret Uriah from this point onwards in the novel, since this is the narrator's view of the character and the only view the reader gets of him throughout the book.

The definition of physiognomy is the act of using physical features to determine a person's character or personality. According to an article written in 1868 about physiognomy, a leading expert at the time claimed "the temperament is more influenced by the build and shape of the body than by the colour of the eyes, hair, or skin..." ("Physiognomy" 143). While David's first impression of Uriah is based on the color of his eyes and the slimy feel of his skin when they shake hands, not on his build, he assumes that the young man is a sinister character. The way Uriah initially presents himself is Dickens' way to depict young David's feelings towards him instead of stating the protagonist's feelings outright.

After the two have officially met and had a conversation, David is so perturbed by the other boy's appearance that it causes him to have doubts about Uriah. On his first night in Canterbury before he starts school again, David has a nightmare about Uriah: "he had launched Mr. Peggotty's house on a piratical expedition, with a black flag at the mast-head, bearing the inscription 'Tidd's Practice,' under which diabolical ensign he was carrying me and little Em'ly to the Spanish Main, to be drowned" (Dickens 246). As the narrator of the novel, David has to have some natural insight into all of the characters that appear in the book. This nightmare could have been partially caused by the recent trauma in his life, but to have such a vivid dream about

someone he just met signifies that he has strong negative feelings about Uriah, even though he is basing this solely on Uriah's exterior self.

Physiognomy was not the only science the Victorians used to judge people based on their outward appearance. Its companion was phrenology, or the study of different parts of a person's skull to determine the specific skills or personality traits they have. Experts of the time claimed that: "The human brain consists of a number of separate portions, of which the general figure may be considered as that of a cone...[and] the liability of any individual of the human race to be the subject of those affections...is in direct proportion to the relative development of these portions of the brain" ("Phrenology" 62). Phrenologists believed that the size of each cone determined a person's strength or weakness in that particular area. However, the popular theory consisted solely of the concept of bumps on the skull indicating the trait or skill. David uses it in the novel in such a manner to describe both the appearance of a pie and, to a greater extent, the character responsible for making it.

After graduating from school and settling into his first apartment, David throws a dinner party for some of his friends to celebrate. His alcoholic landlady, Mrs. Crupp, offers to cook, and David reluctantly agrees, knowing her culinary skills are less than to be desired: "The pigeon-pie was not bad, but it was a delusive pie: the crust being like a disappointing head, phrenologically speaking: full of lumps and bumps, with nothing particular underneath" (Dickens 420). David's description of the pie gives the reader a vivid mental image of what it looked like in a way that Victorian readers would easily be able to relate to, due to the popularity of phrenology. Mrs. Crupp's phrenologically disappointing pie is an excellent indication of David's judgment of her character. The appearance of her pie is his way of explaining to the reader that she is a well-

meaning, though somewhat vacuous woman, but her fondness for alcohol is a bump on the skull of her character, impeding her ability to cook edible food for her tenants.

The Victorians may have popularized physiognomy and phrenology, but the idea of understanding someone else's personality can be traced to as early as Plato and the ancient Chinese civilizations. This notion has not limited to the field of science: "Historically, there have been periods where physiognomy has been more explicitly popular and this may relate to certain factors present at that particular socio-historical context" (Twine 69). Though it has not been as prominent in some eras as it has been as in others, from the Victorian era onwards, humans have based first impressions on another's exterior to determine what they are like. This has become more of a phenomenon in recent years, even though many first impressions are wrong.

While David is staying with the Wickfields, he regards Mr. Wickfield as a strong, independent man, capable of taking care of himself and his daughter, Agnes, as best he could without his deceased wife. However, not long after the protagonist left the school and the care of Wickfield, Uriah Heep squirms his way into controlling the law firm Wickfield owns, which takes a toll on the older man's health: "The thing that struck me most, was, that with the evidences of his native superiority still upon him, he should submit himself to that crawling impersonation of meanness, Uriah Heep" (Dickens 521). At this point in the novel, Wickfield appears to have aged considerably, as well as been put under a tremendous amount of stress. David uses the physical description of Wickfield in this current state to tell the reader his interpretation of what has happened. Underneath his words, however, the reader can also infer that David's perception of him as a mentally strong character has changed to that of a weaker one, both emotionally and physically.

Throughout the book, there have been three eerie and frightening villains making David's life rather miserable, one of those villains being Uriah Heep. The other two are Mr. and Miss Murdstone, a cruel brother-sister duo that work in tandem to destroy David's mother, Mrs. Copperfield's, fragile mental and physical state. After her death, Mr. Murdstone finds another woman to ruin; this time, however, Dr. Chillip, the doctor who delivers David, examines the two of them: "“Strong phrenological development of the organ of firmness, in Mr. Murdstone and his sister, sir”" (Dickens 838). The Murdstones, during their time at Blunderstone, rule the Copperfield household with firm rules and discipline. Both rarely crack a smile, and when they do, there is a grim feeling behind it. Along with his personal experiences, David uses these severe mannerisms to assume that they are strict, unforgiving people set on causing misery to those they can trick into allowing them into their lives.

During the Victorian era, and, for a while afterwards, people used phrenology and physiognomy to try to prove criminals guilty because they had dubious facial features. Those that were found to be unsavory-looking were targeted for crimes they never committed: "If you could mark out a criminal from the shape of his skull (and by default the shape and size of the brain contained within) you could, surely, defeat the criminal before the crime had been committed" (Wilkerson). It did not stop at the formation of a suspect's skull, however. Physiognomy also played a role in deciding who looked guilty and who didn't. If someone had a specific facial feature, such as the shape of a nose, which was deemed to be suspicious, people with the same-shaped nose would automatically be associated as a criminal.

Towards the end of David Copperfield's narrative, he travels with Traddles, his old schoolmate, to visit their former headmaster, Mr. Creakle, at his new employment with one of the prisons nearby. One of the two inmates they visit is none other than Uriah Heep, convicted

for bank fraud and forgery. While Uriah speaks directly to the protagonist as a demure, well-behaved prisoner, the look on his face tells a different story: “‘You knew me, a long time before I came here and was changed, Mr. Copperfield,’ said Uriah, looking at me; and a more villainous look I ever saw, even on his visage” (Dickens 860). Underneath Uriah’s “changed” persona, the look on his face suggests to David he is manipulating the prison wardens to believe that he is a virtuous man. However, through his expression when speaking to David along with his shady physical features, the narrator demonstrates that Uriah Heep is not the saint he portrays himself to be.

All in all, the use of phrenology and physiognomy in *David Copperfield* turns out to be useful in determining a character’s personality and character traits. Though they are both now considered pseudosciences and had negative social implications during the Victorian era, there is something to be said for the way that humans can make a relatively accurate judgment of another’s personality and character from the initial meeting. People are often quite wrong in making such assumptions, but in David’s case, he is spot-on most of the time when it comes to determining the type of person each character was. He knows right away that there is something about the Murdstones and Uriah that was unpleasant from how they first present themselves to him. The innate sense humans have about other humans, even in novels, is remarkable, even if it can occasionally lead to trouble.

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