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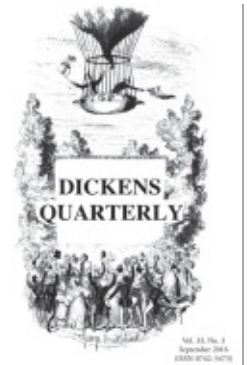
Unflattening Mrs. Micawber

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Unflattening Mrs. Micawber

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“Characters arrive when evoked,” E. M. Forster announced during the now-famous lectures that he delivered in Cambridge in 1927, “but full of the spirit of mutiny” (*Aspects of the Novel* 66). He was thinking about the difficulty of reconciling the lives of human beings with the construction of “people” in novels and about the challenges of maintaining an effective balance between character and other aspects of a novel. A somewhat different kind of mutiny is proposed here, one that focuses on a traditionally devalued character in order to challenge the widespread practice of repeating Forster’s formulas in ways that have encouraged a superficial dismissal of Dickens’s methods of characterization. While acknowledging the broader and decisive shift in modernist attitudes toward the representation of inner life in fiction, though without entering into full confrontation with Bloomsbury anxieties toward Victorian influences, I would like to wrest Mrs. Micawber out of the clutches of an attitude that has made it easier to iconoclastically gloss over Dickens’s art of the novel.

According to E. M. Forster, the “really flat character,” for which he offered Mrs. Micawber as his paradigmatic example, can be “expressed in one sentence” that is easily remembered by the “emotional eye.” Such characters, he claimed, fail to “surprise in a convincing way” because they do not exhibit “the incalculability of life” – even if “life within the pages of a book” (67–78). Prominent explicators of narrative fiction (and life) immediately took issue with Forster’s definitions,¹ yet their caveats remain less popular than his categorizations along with his choice of examples. Every study of literary character must therefore acknowledge today that Forster’s categorizations are permanently entrenched in our critical discourse,² and this extraordinary

1 Immediately after the Clark lectures, Edwin Muir’s *Structure of the Novel* attempted to attenuate Forster’s character assessments (134–46). Virginia Woolf expressed stronger reservations in two trenchant reviews and indirectly, according to S. P. Rosenbaum, in what grew into *A Room of One’s Own* (“E. M. Forster” 106).

2 Acknowledging Forster’s impact, a recent wave of interest in literary characterization has tended to bypass his emphasis on typology and mimeticism to

impact makes it particularly intriguing to revisit the character who bears the brunt of flatness theory.

Deirdre Lynch reminds us that E. M. Forster did not invent the concepts of round and flat characters. Early-nineteenth-century reviewers referred to “insipid, lifeless characters” as flat because they tasted like “soda water, too long in the bottle, that has also gone ‘flat’” (267, n. 4), and rotundity was used in the seventeenth century to evaluate Falstaff’s ambiguities (137).³ Still, Forster’s definitions and examples have become the cornerstone for assessments of literary characters, especially in introductory guidebooks. James Brown’s and Scott Yarbrough’s *Practical Introduction to Literary Study*, which advocates reading fiction in order to develop critical thinking, does not rehearse Forster’s examples but it does summarize his definition of flats that “stay the same no matter what they have encountered” vs. rounds who are capable of learning something (58). By contrast, Jeremy Hawthorn’s *Studying the Novel* goes in for the entire kit and caboodle, albeit hedged in by a gentle attempt to attenuate its validity. He begins by citing Forster’s reduction of Mrs. Micawber to one sentence (‘I never will desert Mr. Micawber’): “There is Mrs. Micawber – she says she won’t desert Mr. Micawber, she doesn’t, and there she is” (Hawthorn citing Foster). He then clarifies that “Mrs. Micawber does not change because she is not allowed genuine interaction with other people and situations,” (90) but signals a degree of skepticism by adding in a glossary that *Aspects of the Novel* “provides the now-clichéd distinction between the round and the flat character; the former having depth, complexity and unpredictability, and the latter being reduced almost to a single quality” (149). The overall effect despite this guidebook’s nuanced and extended discussion of characterization, is nevertheless a perpetuation of Forster’s examples, if not his categorizations.

Encyclopedia Britannica cites Mrs. Micawber as the classic (and only) example of a flat character that never surprises the reader, and H. M. Abrams’s entry on “Character and Characterization,” arguably the most authoritative *Glossary of Literary Terms*, offers Mr. Micawber (instead of his wife) as “unchanged in outlook and disposition, from beginning to end” in contrast to Austen’s Emma, who allegedly undergoes “radical” change (48). Even if we concede that twenty-year-old Emma Woodhouse agreeing

concentrate instead on cognitive assumptions that we bring to the interpretation of character (Walsh, Vermeule) and to refine our appreciation of the creative and technical feats that go into its construction (Woloch). Strident rejections of Forster’s attitude are Herbert Grabes’s “Turning Words on the Page into ‘Real’ People” and George Clay’s “In Defense of Flat Characters,” while David Galef and W. J. Harvey support and expand Forster’s typology.

3 Forster himself noted that flat characters were known as humorous types and caricatures (67).

to get married and be less impulsive is a legitimate example of “radical” change – why switch one of the Micawbers for the other? To charge *Mrs. Micawber* with flatness is commonplace, but Mr. Micawber experiences a series of crises far more extensive than Miss Woodhouse’s, even though at the end he returns to his former buoyancy. Mrs. Micawber, as we shall see, does far more than come along for the ride.

The goal of this paper is to make it a little harder to use Dickens’s characters as stereotypes of flatness, and to do so in a manner that supports recent developments toward a more accurate assessment of character construction. The problem we are confronting here has two main sources: a propensity for typologies mediated by Forster’s definitions and examples of round and flat characters, and interrelatedly, the aesthetic and psychological impact of modernist representations of inner life on art and other media. This modernist shift in aesthetic and psychological attitudes, which led to a refinement of realist techniques, stemmed in part from Bloomsbury anxieties toward its Victorian predecessors,⁴ and resulted academically in a stalemate between mimetic and formalist approaches currently undergoing something of a breakthrough.⁵ To know Dickens today, one must therefore wade through this entanglement.

Rosemary Bodenheimer’s *Knowing Dickens* begins by recalling an ambivalent 1925 review of *David Copperfield*, which Virginia Woolf wrote seventy five years after that novel’s initial publication (1). In her review published two years prior to Forster’s lectures, Woolf grudgingly admitted that “subtlety and complexity are all there if we know where to look for them, if we can get over the surprise of finding them” (“*David Copperfield*” 191–95). Woolf’s preoccupation with the construction of character – so epigrammatically encapsulated in her “on or about December 1910, human character changed” (“Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown” 320) – in turn became an opening gambit for literary-historical discussions of modernist attitudes toward characterization.⁶

On his part, Forster professed to have locked literary-historical tensions out of the Bloomsbury library where he imagined novelists writing in utopian

4 Brian Rosenberg has argued that an appreciation for Dickens’s method of characterization rises when realist conventions are less fashionable (17–18). On Bloomsbury anxieties towards the Victorians, see Simon Joyce’s “On or About 1901” and S. P. Rosenbaum’s *Victorian Bloomsbury*.

5 An excellent overview of the stalemate between mimetic and formalist approaches to characterization is given by Woloch (14–21); see also W. J. Harvey’s introductory chapter to *Character and the Novel*. On the difficulty of avoiding a mimetic approach, see James Phelan’s preface to *Reading People, Reading Plots*.

6 For instance, Baruch Hochman’s *The Test of Character: from the Victorian Novel to the Modern*.

harmony. But disingenuous statements such as “those who dislike Dickens have an excellent case. He ought to be bad. He is actually one of our big writers” (*Aspects of the Novel* 71–72), suggest that personal competition to some extent fueled Forster’s rhetoric. In his private notebook he admits *Great Expectations* as a masterpiece – claiming that Dickens is boring “only [...] when he is bad” (*The Commonplace Book* [16–19]) – but the final verdict, nonetheless, is that “the world of beauty was largely closed” to him (*Aspects of the Novel* 17). Ironically, some of Forster’s own novels, especially *Howards End*, draw on Dickens more heavily than did other members of the Bloomsbury circle – and Harrington Weihl goes as far as to characterize *Howards End* as wavering between Victorianism and a “limited modernism” (444). Still, when formulating a modernist poetics of the novel, Forster assailed Dickens’s comic realism for insufficiently capturing human interactions and thought processes.

I am only mildly interested in thinking about Mrs. Micawber as a “real” person or even as an *implied person*, the clever term that Alex Woloch introduced to match Wayne Booth’s implied author and implied reader functions. Yet precisely because our “tendency to think of literary characters as if they were real people is a habit lodged deep in the human psyche, and no amount of literary-critical sophistication is likely to cure people of it” (Vermeule 176) – a habit which Dickens helped to fuel in letters and prefaces to his novels – my concern with Mrs. Micawber’s reputation must remain focused primarily on her deeds and words on the literary page. Although we do naturalize her when we speak about her as having a “history,” this history is included in *David Copperfield* for all to read if they so choose. A subtler impact on our assessment of Mrs. Micawber, is the critical tone that Dickens’s (older) narrator adopts in reference to this character. It affects the reader’s approach in hidden ways, and more than anything else, justifies Forster’s *et al*’s mocking attitude toward this character.

Of course, attitudes toward Mrs. Micawber are conditioned as well by the degree of sympathy that any individual reader may feel for her as a woman, wife, daughter or mother, what Frances Ferguson calls the “literary hailing” process (523–24). Attuned to this type of affect, new reception-oriented analyses, which have internalized advances in cognitive studies, are now producing some of the most informative assessments of literary characterization – notably Richard Walsh’s comprehensive analysis of Little Nell and Blakey Vermeule’s attempt to explain *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Or not.) Yet because Mrs. Micawber is not just a long-neglected character, but also an archly-stereotyped one, the necessary spadework in this case must be conducted first at a more basic level.

Mrs. Micawber has a proper name (Emma Micawber); she has a history tied to her upbringing under “papa and mama,” which in turn shapes

her attitudes and opportunities relative to the status, place and time into which she was born. Such historical awareness situates *David Copperfield* squarely within the context of “condition of England” novels produced in the 1840s, as Kathleen Tillotson has demonstrated. But although this genre-oriented historicized approach is essential, it too is unlikely to redeem this particular character from decades of flat stereotyping, for it too involves reading around rather than through this novel in relation to Forster’s position towards it.

Neither can we solve Forster’s *et al.*’s devaluation of Mrs. Micawber by transferring her from a flat box into a round one, or by praising flatness and other varieties of minor characters. As Alex Woloch shows, the most effective way to redeem minor characters is to assess their roles *vis-à-vis* other characters in a complex network of relationships. But before we get there, we must first open what Uri Margolin calls a “character file,” into which “all further information about the corresponding individual will be continuously accumulated, structured, and updated as one reads on, until the final product, or character profile is reached at the end of the reading act” (76).

Is there anything intrinsic about Mrs. Micawber that has forestalled the assembly of such a profile though information about her is readily available in the text? Is Forster responsible for blocking a fuller appreciation of this character or was Dickens’s construction responsible for generating this depreciative effect? Citing Forster, David Galef insists that “a well-drawn flat character provokes no further probing” because (or rather despite?) being “easily remembered by the reader” (2–3). Yet if flats are so memorable, why have we glossed over most of what Mrs. Micawber says and does in this novel? And once alerted to her larger significance, are we reconditioned to view her afresh or do we revert to the flat view?

Several details about Mrs. Micawber do not tally with Forster’s definition. First of all, she has more than one key sentence; secondly, she is surprising, at least to some extent; if memorable, then evidently in a selective fashion. If we insist on using Mrs. Micawber as a paradigm of flatness – a character strongly present in the narrative and vividly constructed but not fully fleshed out in a realistic manner – it is necessary either to refine Forster’s definitions or to do a better job at defending his selected examples. No doubt Mrs. Micawber is comic despite her difficulties and not “lifelike” in the psychologically detailed manner of High Realism. Yet it is hardly tenable to reduce her to a comic stick figure without eliding whole sections of Dickens’s novel.

File Under: Emma Micawber

Mrs. Micawber will never desert Mr. Micawber – but she is hardly stuck to him on every page. She has a number of private conversations with David and is capable of operating behind her husband's back. At what junctures in *David Copperfield* does Dickens introduce Mrs. Micawber into the narrative and what are the purposes of these appearances? Mrs. Micawber appears at six different junctures in the novel, usually in conjunction with, but not necessarily next to her children and husband: (1) when the newly-orphaned ten-year-old David comes to work at Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse; (2) briefly in Canterbury after David has been adopted by Aunt Betsy; (3) when David's school-friend Traddles "coincidentally" lodges with the Micawbers, coincidences that were budgeted into Dickens's installment plans as a strategy to keep the Micawbers in readiness for the novel's dénouement;⁷ (4) when Aunt Betsy loses her savings and moves to London with Mr. Dick; (5) in the buildup toward the novel's climax, when Mrs. Micawber alerts her young friends about her husband's altered behavior, thus facilitating his exposure of Uriah's embezzlement; (6) and finally, during the Australian emigration in the novel's aftermath.

The first time that David meets Mrs. Micawber, she strikes him as "a thin and faded lady, not at all young [...] sitting in the parlor [...] with a baby at her breast. This baby was one of twins; and [...] one of them was always taking refreshment." Though described as worn out, Mrs. Micawber is vigorous in conversation, for as soon as she shows David up to the room that he will occupy, she confides: "I never thought [...] before I was married, when I lived with papa and mama, that I should ever find it necessary to take a lodger. But Mr Micawber being in difficulties, all considerations of private feeling must give way" (168; ch.11). A lack of consideration for the lodger's own feelings jumps out here, but Mrs. Micawber's sincerity, and the similarities in their mutual social disorientation immediately establish the grounds for a genuine friendship that transcends differences in gender and age. Like Mrs. Micawber, David had expectations of a genteel lifestyle; like her he now struggles to maintain a genteel demeanor under trying circumstances. Nevertheless, and while constantly noting how the Micawbers enlivened his leisure time, the narrating older David declares that "From Monday until Saturday night, I had no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no assistance, no support, of any kind, from any one" (170; ch. 11).

The young Copperfield nevertheless gains a measure of strength by assisting the Micawbers through their difficulties. One afternoon, when he

7 Butt and Tillotson 132–33 and 145.

exceptionally offers to subsidize their supper, Mrs. Micawber kisses him and makes him put his coins back into his pocket, declaring that “she couldn’t think of it” (175; ch. 11). Instead, she asks him to pawn her last valuables. Her parting kiss from the coach to Plymouth is therefore not the first time that Mrs. Micawber acts in a motherly way toward the boy – although the older narrator later declares so – and she also plies him with gratitude: “I shall never [...] revert to the period when Mr Micawber was in difficulties, without thinking of you [...] You have never been a lodger. You have been a friend” (185; ch. 11).

For every paragraph devoted to the boy’s self-sufficiency, menial tasks and street wanderings, two or three paragraphs are devoted to his friendship with the Micawbers and their positive outlook during this very difficult time in their lives. Later I shall return to the autobiographical context of this episode, but first I would like to suggest that in these early chapters, the most crucial consequence of David’s relationship with the Micawbers – “I do not know how it came into my head” (184; ch. 12) – is that as soon as he learns about Mrs. Micawber’s plan to seek assistance from her not-so-willing relatives in Plymouth, he too decides to take to the road and throw himself upon the mercy of his sole remaining relative in Dover. David’s first independent action – “I Form a Great Resolution” – is therefore inspired by Mrs. Micawber’s.

A brief chance meeting occasions the next appearance of the Micawbers in Canterbury a few months later. In terms of the novel’s plot, this meeting serves to engineer a fleeting acquaintance between Mr. Micawber and Uriah Heep, which Dickens needs for the novel’s denouement. David learns at this point that the Micawbers were not as successful with their relatives as he had been with his aunt, and that Mrs. Micawber is now accompanying her husband to search for further job opportunities. About the Coal Trade and the Custom House she offers incisive comments that are “not only extremely funny, but also bring us nearer to the heart of both those institutions than the little we learn about export and import in *Dombey and Son*” (Storey 167). When Mrs. Micawber reiterates that she will never abandon her husband, one begins to suspect that she may be actually worried that *he* could abandon her and therefore tags along.

Several years later, once again “coincidentally,” David discovers his school-friend Traddles lodged with the Micawbers in London. As with the Canterbury coincidence, Dickens sacrifices plausibility here to strengthen it for the final scenes, where Mr. Micawber will indict Uriah with Traddles’s assistance. By thus bringing together David’s circle of acquaintances, Dickens is attempting to integrate his subplots more tightly in anticipation of the comedic climax. In the novel’s aftermath he links the Micawbers with the Peggottys via the Australian emigration plan too.

David's perception of Mrs. Micawber changes over the course of his acquaintance with her. When he is smitten by Dora, Mrs. Micawber strikes him as "a little more slatternly than she used to be" (415; ch. 27); her ballads are now sung "in a small, thin flat voice, which I remember to have considered, when I first knew her, the very table-beer of acoustics" (430; ch. 28). By contrast, Mr. Micawber's admiration for his wife remains as strong as ever, though he is more critical of her attitude toward "her" family:

'it may be better for me to state distinctly [...] that your family are, in the aggregate, impertinent Snobs; and, in detail, unmitigated Ruffians [...] At the same time, my dear, if they should condescend to reply to your communications – which our joint experience renders most improbable – far be it from me to be a barrier to your wishes' (779–80; ch. 54).

Such "edgeway" glimpses into Mr. and Mrs. Micawber's lives and opinions, portray their personalities and circumstances from more than one perspective – although to be sure, these sideway views are a "conjuring trick," as Forster claims (71). But rather than *concealing* a shallow mechanical mode of characterization, they work to *reveal* enough views – enough glimpses of inner life – to jointly evoke a psychological and social resonance capable of transcending stereotype. A "typical nineteenth-century novel presents some two dozen interrelated characters," while Dickens's "go up to fifty or more" (Eder 26). The extreme difficulty of juggling this overloaded acrobatics of character and incident necessarily curtails the number of contradictory side views that can be reasonably accommodated, and although Dickens's sideway flashes are packed with significance, they do move away extremely quickly. As Anne Gibson puts it, Forster "was half right in attributing the nervous energy of Dickens's characters to physical 'vibrations,'" but "he was also half wrong" (65), and what Forster defines as flatness, Gibson reads "as an alternative version of character psychology" linked not to "implied psychological roundness" but rather to "physiological responsiveness to social interaction" (75).

Before returning to our overview of Mrs. Micawber's appearances in the novel, it is important to remark on Traddles's role as a deflector of "pecuniary" pressures exerted by the Micawbers on everyone around them. Rather than address the Micawbers's constant borrowing through their relationship with David, Dickens chose to deflect these pressures unto Traddles. As a young lodger, David did feel that the family's financial woes reached a crescendo on his paydays. Yet when he offers to buy food, as we saw, Mrs. Micawber staunchly refuses to touch his money. He later declares that they never actually asked him for a loan even during his more prosperous bachelor days, yet in vain he warns Traddles against accepting Mr. Micawber's IOUs. This

constitutes a variation of Dickens's own relationship with his parents, for whom he was a provider and whose father was known for issuing IOUs on the strength of his son's name (Kaplan 83–4; Johnson 53).

When Aunt Betsy loses her comfortable means of support, the Micawbers reappear as both a practical and self-indulgent contrast to Aunt Betsy and Mr. Dick's comic stoicism. Having earned his first few shillings by copying legal manuscripts, Mr. Dick boasts that "'There's no starving now [...] I'll provide for [Betsy], sir!'" and he flourished his ten fingers in the air, as if they were ten banks" (535; ch. 36). The Micawbers like to splurge whenever they can, of course, but Mrs. Micawber is now busy devising a new plan to find employment for her husband: she advises him to advertise his qualifications in a newspaper. And so, when Aunt Betsy and Mr. Dick move up to London in the wake of Heep's misuse of their investments, the Micawbers move down to Canterbury to become unwitting pawns in Heep's schemes (for it is he who "coincidentally" answers Mr. Micawber's job application). With no prior knowledge of the nefarious intention behind Heep's offer of employment, Mrs. Micawber nevertheless worries that this line of work might curtail her husband's chances of climbing higher to become "'a judge, or even say a chancellor'" (538; ch. 36). The last laugh is that Micawber does, after all, become a magistrate in Australia.

The Micawbers's fifth appearance is their most important intervention in the plot. In his memoranda, Dickens instructed himself to prepare incrementally for this climax by closing chapter 42 "with Mrs Micawber's letter describing change in Micawber" (Butt and Tillotson 157). Thus, in a letter to Traddles, Mrs. Micawber describes her husband's sudden "aberration of intellect," "violent paroxysm" and total estrangement from her (709–710; ch. 49). She does not know that this is the result of his involvement in Heep's schemes – for he fears that if he exposes Uriah, his family will become indigent again, but he hates himself for this collusion, and therefore hides it from his wife, who symbolizes moral uprightness to him. It is she who discovers the half-burnt ledger that enables her husband to expose the embezzler, restoring the family's harmony along with the stolen properties.

Surprisingly, the relationship of the Micawbers with each other and the world, despite its many points of friction, is based on a moral sense of integrity. It is therefore interesting that when a real opportunity for advancement "turns up," it should occur in Australia, associated as it was at that time with the convicts and prostitutes routinely shipped there, including by Dickens and Miss Coutts in their benevolent rescue of "fallen" women. When in gratitude for her restored property, Aunt Betsy finances the Australian plan, Mrs. Micawber again wishes to know whether "the circumstances of the country [are] such, that a man of Mr Micawber's abilities would have a fair chance of rising in the social scale [...] would there be a

reasonable opening for his talents to develop themselves [...] and find their own expansion?" (768–69; ch. 53). The unwavering labor of keeping her husband righteous and optimistic has been shorthanded in what, echoing Forster, Q. D. Leavis calls Mrs. Micawber's "theme song" (101). But Mrs. Micawber's vow to never abandon her husband is a complicated theme that does not reduce her to a sentence or two, even if we take into account the tension between effusive faithfulness toward her husband and her maiden expectations of a genteel lifestyle that is realized only in exile.

On the eve of their emigration, Mrs. Micawber admits that "The gulf between my family and Mr Micawber may be traced to [their] apprehension [...] that Mr Micawber would require pecuniary accommodation," yet she hopes that her relatives will come forward now to say goodbye and sponsor "a festive entertainment [...] where Mr Micawber might have an opportunity of developing his views" (779; ch. 54); a comic inversion of this scenario does come to fruition in Australia – when fellow expatriates celebrate the Micawbers's accomplishments without forgetting to toast Mrs. Micawber's relatives in the mother country. Indeed, although David *reports* that Mrs. Micawber's last words to him were that she would never desert Mr. Micawber, her last *direct* words in the novel express a hope that "at a future period, we may live again on the parent soil [...] which gave [her husband] birth, and did *not* give him employment!" (815; ch. 57). The tension between faithfulness to the memory of her parental home and faithfulness to her husband is maintained to the very end of the novel.

Mobility and Surprise

When critics refer to a flat character's immobility, they usually mean that its psychological attitude does not change over the course of the narrative. Boris Uspensky, however, putting a spin on E. M. Forster's flat/round categorizations, actually divides characters into two types based on physical mobility:

those who can move about freely and those who remain stationary, who cannot change their environment, but are bound to a particular place. The roles of the mobile characters are commonly played by the central figures of the narrative, while the stationary characters are usually secondary figures [...] part of the description of the background. (161)

Mrs. Micawber plays a significant role in *David Copperfield's* structural and conceptual background in ways that will be further elaborated, but it is worth noting at this point that for all the talk about her as static and

unidimensional, she certainly moves around considerably: from London to Plymouth plus a side visit to Canterbury; then London and Canterbury again; finally from the sweltering Australian Bush to the more gentrified Australian Port Middlebay. Two of these relocations – Plymouth and Canterbury – are directly initiated by her; but except when Mr. Micawber imagines that he is secretly visiting London, the couple travels together.

The decision to move the family to Plymouth in hope of securing her family's assistance does not result in a breakthrough – although as we saw, it does provide the young David with a crucial example of how he might extricate himself from the hated warehouse and risk everything in search of his eccentric aunt. David in general is not an active creature;⁸ he gets swept along by circumstances, while remaining stubbornly faithful to those he has loved. Yet it is this faithfulness – which he shares with Mrs. Micawber – that initially earns him Aunt Betsy's trust. Though it takes much longer for Mrs. Micawber's faith in her husband to produce "pecuniary" rewards, when the breakthrough comes, it also comes through the outstretched hand of Aunt Betsy.

It is indeed easier to appreciate Mrs. Micawber when we compare her with Betsy Trotwood, who apologizes for her unreasonable behavior the night of David's birth – when she appeared out of nowhere, flattening her nose against the windowpane and insisting that Mrs. Coppefield give birth to a girl. She had then hoped to be born again, to repair her own romantic misfortunes through a new version of herself; but eventually she works herself out of her trauma and becomes the most reasonable creature in the novel. Mrs. Micawber does not change in such a drastic manner, but she is elastic enough to adopt a "businesslike air" (538; ch. 36) a melancholy air (181; ch. 12); to burst into hysterics (182; ch. 12) and generally remain affably polite even under trying conditions (778; ch. 54).

Forster defines flatness as intrinsically unsurprising. It was therefore surprising for me to realize, on closer examination, that Mrs. Micawber surprises David (or so he claims) when she looks at him tenderly and kisses him (186; ch. 12); when he sees her feasting a few hours after falling "under the grate" in despair (170; ch. 11); when he finds her aged and faded; and when he reads the second letter alarming him and Traddles about the change in Mr. Micawber's behavior (707; ch. 49). Still, could we ever imagine Mrs. Micawber actually deserting Mr. Micawber or being deserted by him? Tiptoeing around the warnings of L. C. Knights,⁹ can we even imagine her breaching class barriers by renting herself out, for example, to suckle someone

8 Alexander Welsh diagnoses him as a passive-aggressive protagonist-narrator (141–55).

9 *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* (1931) cautions against the pitfalls of treating characters as if they were real people with a logical background history.

else's child as does Polly Toodle in *Dombey and Son*? Or succeeding with the schoolhouse she had tried to establish? Without stretching so far, does Mrs. Micawber act predictably within the events of the novel? The answer is that for the most part, yes, she acts according to middle-class genteel parameters on behalf of her husband and children and in honor of the memory of her parents. During most of her trials she maintains a mid-Victorian sense of dignity and optimism against all odds, yet, all in all, it *is* rather surprising that she manages to do this, and comic that she insists upon it.

Most surprising are the sideway flashes that give us deeper insight into the history behind the Micawbers's marriage. These background flashes occur at various junctures in the novel:

'My dear young friend,' said Mr Micawber [...] 'My advice is, never do to-morrow what you can do to-day [...]

'My poor papa's maxim,' Mrs Micawber observed.

'My dear,' said Mr Micawber, 'your papa was very well in his way, and Heaven forbid that I should disparage him [...] But he applied that maxim to our marriage, my dear; and that was so far prematurely entered into, in consequence, that I never recovered the expense.'

Mr Micawber looking aside at Mrs Micawber, added, 'Not that I am sorry for it. Quite the contrary, my love.' After which he was grave for a minute or so. (185–86; ch. 12)

Micawber traces his financial incompetence to his wife's father, whom he accuses here of instigating a hasty marriage before the groom had proper means of support. Papa seems to have been rather vain about his deportment – “we ne'er shall – in short, make the acquaintance, probably, of anybody else possessing, at his time of life, the same legs for gaiters” (185; ch. 12). Yet unlike the narcissistic Mr. Turveydrop in *Bleak House*, Mrs. Micawber's father appreciates his daughter, “When I lived at home with my papa and mama, my papa was accustomed to ask, when any point was under discussion in our limited circle, ‘In what light does my Emma view the subject?’ ” (778; ch. 54) This suggests that her father would have guided himself according to her wishes in timing the marriage too. On the other hand, the idea that any maxim can be rigidly applied to every circumstance – “never do to-morrow what you can do to-day” – highlights the limitations of all the refrains to which the (extended) Micawber family – not to mention E. M. Forster's followers – are so addicted.

The Formula

Accustomed to reducing Mrs. Micawber to a “never desert” sentence, readers may also be surprised to notice her subtle efforts at guiding and chiding her husband: “I have pointed out to Mr Micawber several times of late, that things cannot be expected to turn up of themselves. We must, in a measure, assist to turn them up” (427; ch. 28). That “something may turn up” is Mr. Micawber’s favorite refrain; he loiters about in vague expectations of its fulfillment. However, when opportunities do arise in Canterbury and Australia, he lives up to the industriousness that his wife expects.

All characters can be theoretically reduced to some formula depending on how long and complicated we allow it to be. According to E. M. Forster’s schema, such a formula might measure a character’s attitude in relation to every incident in which it is involved. About *Mansfield Park*’s Lady Bertram – an extremely static personality – Forster observes a very subtle change in attitude after her daughters disgrace themselves, and therefore argues that this momentary “globular” expansion reveals the intrinsic roundness of Austen’s style (75). By contrast, he is overwhelmed by Dickens and does not acknowledge that even if we reduce Mrs. Micawber to the formula that he ascribes to her, it is a formula packed with tension.

Kelly Hager has considered the tension behind Mrs. Micawber’s famous statement and concludes that it expresses a fantasy of desertion (140–43) – arguing that Emma Micawber reads her marriage vows by candlelight (537; ch. 36) because she feels trapped – legally, morally, socially – by marriage to a man who “kept me in the dark as to his resources and liabilities, both” (182; ch. 12). Yet it is also possible to interpret Mrs. Micawber’s frequent references to desertion as an expression of fear that he might desert *her*. In any case, Mrs. Micawber’s declaration expresses rather than represses what Helene Cixous identified as “the unconsciousness that poses a threat to established order” (384).

The “theme song” to which Forster *et al.* reduce Mrs. Micawber (“I never will desert Mr. Micawber”) appears eleven times over the course of the novel, but “when I lived with papa and mama” appears a similar number of times. Moreover, seven “never deserts” are packed into two passages in chapters 12 and 28, at a time when Mrs. Micawber is overwrought by incertitude, alcohol and physical privations – while five “papas and mamas” are concentrated into chapter 11, preceding the hysterical announcement of her unwavering loyalty to Mr. Micawber, and introducing her in this immature and nostalgic context.

All in all, if we insist upon reducing Mrs. Micawber to one caricature-esque feature, it should be her extraordinary elasticity. Dickens’s illustrator,

Hablot Browne, did emphasize this stance by always arching her body as if she were ready to bounce back (see Fig. 1).

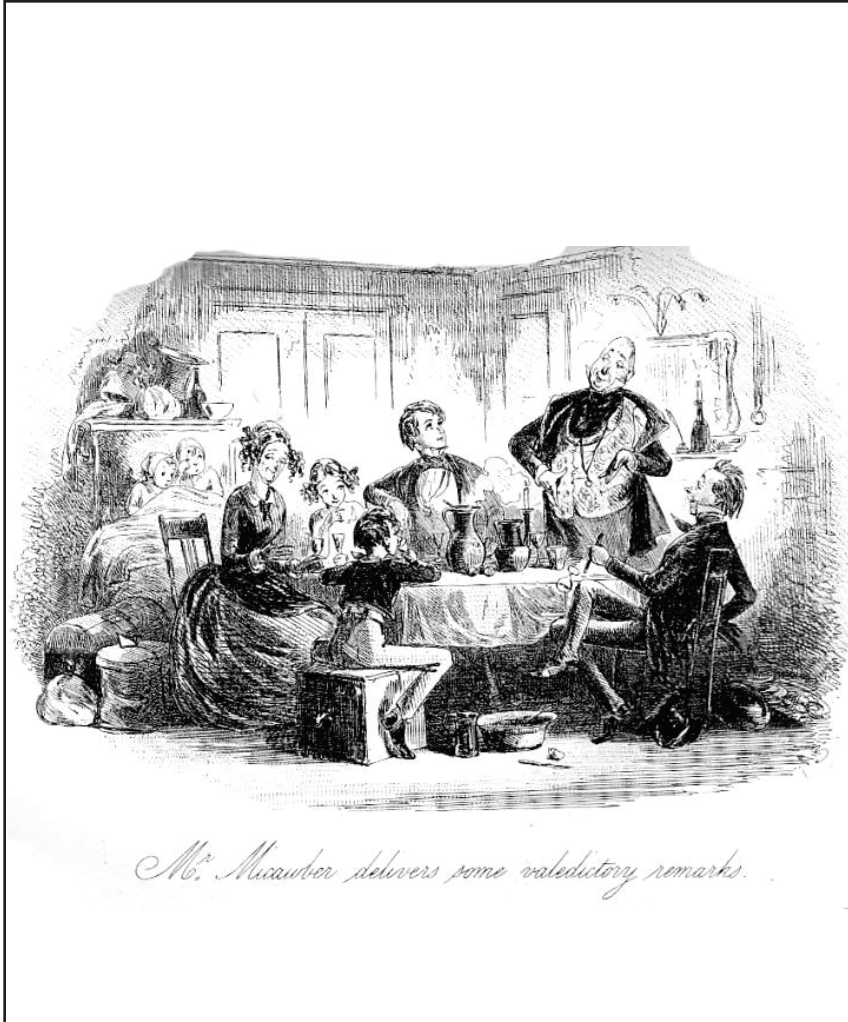


Fig. 1

Capacity for Change

Change is a strong word. How many (real) human beings actually change psychologically over the course of their lives?¹⁰ And what exactly does Forster mean when he describes character as moving “through circumstances” without being changed *by* them (69)? I suppose that if Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* did not alter her attitude despite her bitter experiences, we would be surprised; and I suppose, too, that Mrs. Bertram’s willingness to momentarily adjust her attitude may surprise us if we read her, for example, in light of Mrs. Gradgrind’s unwavering stupor in *Hard Times*. But given the scholarly history that now stands in judgment of Mrs. Micawber, it is worth quoting from her letter to David, in which she records the alterations she had been noting in her husband:

“You will picture to yourself, my dear Mr Copperfield, what the poignancy of my feelings must be, when I inform you that Mr Micawber is entirely changed. He is reserved. He is secret [...] he inexorably refuses to give any explanation whatever of this distracting policy.” (631; ch. 42)

The architectonic need to describe a “change in Mr Micawber’s behavior,” requires an alteration in Mrs. Micawber’s behavior as well – she must not desert him! – but she operates strategically behind his back. *He* deserted her (in a spiritual sense and by dashing off to London stealthily) and she now searches for a way to bring him back to *himself*. The agency and elegance with which she expresses this, is once again, surprising, if we are limited to E. M. Forster’s view of her character. Following the first letter to which David replies with polite commonplaces, she then sends a more urgent appeal via Traddles, begging her two young friends “to see my misguided husband, and to reason with him,” and she also begs them to keep her request “*strictly private, and on no account whatever to be alluded to, however distantly, in the presence of Mr Micawber*” (710, ch. 49, italics in the original).

Mr. Micawber changes (for the worse), and then reverts back to his old flamboyant behavior to everyone’s relief (except Uriah’s). Moreover, apart from the novel’s protagonist – who reflects on his youthful immaturity – only one character in this *bildungsroman* can be said to undergo an elaborate change of outlook and disposition: Betsy Trotwood takes a hard look at her earlier attitudes and forces herself to soften her behavior. She moves

10 Using insights from narrative theory, Jerome Bruner has asked cognitive psychologists to assess the attitudes of their patients by identifying a “congruence between saying, doing, and the circumstances in which the saying and doing occur” (19). I am grateful to Leona Toker for bringing this work to my attention.

from bitter rigidity to trustful benevolence. On the other hand, Uriah the villain remains as manipulative as ever and merely pretends to repent in prison. Shattered by Emily's affair with Steerforth, the Peggottys reestablish a semblance of family harmony in Australia. And while David's mother dies under the Murdstones's pressure to change her, David's childish wife, Dora, dies because she cannot improve. Along these lines, Alan Wilde has argued that in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens condensed unrelenting rigidity into an extremely minor character, Mr. F's Aunt, who encapsulates the evil madness of uncharitable stringency (33–44).¹¹ Considering that a call for reform – moral and political – underlies Dickens's entire enterprise, the case of Mrs. Micawber is exemplary in that her reluctance to alter her strained and incompatible attitude toward her family by birth and her family by marriage, positions her as a comic paragon of moral integrity. Forster is right to observe that not changing is a core aspect of Mrs. Micawber's character, but the reasons behind this are rather more complicated than he admits.

A serious assessment of changes in the attitude of novelized characters requires one to take into consideration literary-historical forces that Forster wished to bracket. Expectations of "conversion" at the end of picaresque novels, for example, and the new balance between society and the individual in the *bildungsroman*, which injected romance into a picaresque structure, do affect a novel's emplotment of change. This takes us too far afield from Mrs. Micawber, yet so does the assumption that it is possible to categorize a literary character (psychologically) according to whether or not she seems "changed by circumstances" (69). If we adopt Forster's approach to character development, we not only apply to fictional beings assumptions about real people but we also ascribe to real people assumptions derived from fiction.

In *David Copperfield* Mrs. Micawber functions as a pillar of family values, of genteel efforts, and faithfulness against all odds. She does not change as a matter of principle, but also because she is elastic enough to adjust to stressful circumstances without snapping. Elasticity is the formula that defines her: "I have known her to be thrown into fainting fits by the king's taxes at three o'clock, and to eat lamb-chops, breaded, and drink warm ale (paid for with two teaspoons that had gone to the pawnbroker's) at four" (170; ch. 11).

Insolvency does take a physical toll on Mrs. Micawber, but she refuses to yield to the disappointments of her married life. To resolve the painful discrepancy between her "life with papa and mama" and "never desert Mr Micawber," she therefore encourages her husband to pull himself up and close the gap between her expectations and their circumstances. Instead of sinking into difficulties, Mrs. Micawber expands her expectations and Dickens's

11 More recently, David Paroissien found a counter example in the case of Sir Leicester Dedlock, who at first comes across as a rigid aristocrat, but gradually emerges as capable of extraordinary fairness and generosity.

novel vindicates this silly middle-aged woman in the moral stance that she adopts. As E. M. Forster observes, a serious rendition of this would be dull moralizing, but comedy is the trick that helps Dickens's medicine go down.

Mothers and Heroes

Mrs. Micawber is not only a wife; she is also a mother, a friend, and a daughter. Her structural and thematic roles in the novel – what Alex Woloch identifies as a correlation between a novel's character-spaces and character-system – actually rests on her role as a mother figure more than on her “never desert” function within this novel's gallery of matched and mismatched couples. In contrast with all of *David Copperfield's* “undisciplined hearts,” Mrs. Micawber exemplifies the very disciplined attachment encapsulated in her famous “theme song.” But across the novel's wider network of connections and doubles, she is arguably the most efficient among David's surrogate mothers. Her genteel elasticity, as well as her faithfulness-against-all-odds, contrasts against Clara Copperfield's brittleness and inability to stand by David, as well as against the rude antics of Aunt Betsy, though Betsy comes from a higher social class. Among the novel's younger generation, Agnes too combines the daughter-friend-wife-mother role, as does Sophie Traddles. Yet Agnes, who becomes the mother of David's children, functions all along as his mother or older sister in ways that are not as wholesome (or realistic) as the Micawbers's openly romantic and physical relationship. On a spectrum ranging from perfectly-controlled Agnes to unredeemably-aggressive Miss Dartle, Mrs. Micawber for the most part maintains a genteel poise based on her conscious effort to channel aggression into expectations of improvement.

Mrs. Micawber's middle-class status is clearest in relation to David's nurse, Clara Peggotty, from whom Dickens distinguishes Mrs. Micawber by manner of speech (indicative of education) and the type of labor in which their men are engaged (Micawber, white-collar middleman; Peggottys are fishermen). Breastfeeding babies in front of the ten-year-old David may be a breach of decorum – like the emergency roasting of mutton years later when David invites the Micawbers to dine at his bachelor's quarters – but this earthiness of Mrs. Micawber, despite her punctilious manners, distinguishes her both from the cold haughtiness of Steerforth's mother and on the other hand, from the groveling of Uriah's mother as well as from the kindly but ineffectual Clara Peggotty.

Fine-tuning biographical parallels between Dickens's parents and various parent figures in Dickens's most autobiographical novel, Michael Slater drew a detailed comparison between Elizabeth Dickens and Mrs. Micawber,

determining that this character “bears quite a complicated relationship” to Dickens’s mother:

[Mrs Micawber] is partly an amused, but not contemptuous, view of the real woman by the adult Dickens, carefully distanced from the child David who is re-enacting his author’s childhood sufferings, and partly a ‘wish-fulfillment’ rewriting of the role played by Elizabeth during the blacking-factory time. The ‘mist’ of anger and resentment that covered his memory of her [...] lifted enough in the writing of *Copperfield* for him to see her more truly as she had really been in his later boyhood – harassed and perhaps comically unrealistic in many ways but also courageous, devotedly loyal to her feckless husband, socially delightful and truly concerned to ‘exert herself’ for the sake of her family. (22)

In his assessment of Dickens’s transformation of life experiences into art and vice versa, Slater emphasizes the forgivingness which the older Dickens projects unto his mother through Mrs. Micawber. Channeling “the light and dark” of his childhood memories into a lightheaded Clara Copperfield and a too firm Jane Murdstone, he is freed “to present his mother more objectively through the figure of Mrs Micawber [...] a caricature rather than a portrait, but the harshness has now gone from the drawing” (20). What needs to be added – and this affects the reader’s overall assessment of Mrs. Micawber – is that the older narrator’s tone, signaled for example in Dickens’s choice of adverbs, increasingly belittles Mrs Micawber, while her actions and interactions in the novel as a whole offer a more balanced picture.

What kind of mother is Mrs. Micawber? At first, always nursing one of the twins, always at home, or tugging her children along even to the debtors’ prison. David not actually being one of her children, he is left behind when the Micawbers move to Plymouth; but after the twins are weaned, we are surprised to learn that she has left them (with whom?) to accompany her husband on an employment-scouting expedition; years later, pregnant with their fifth child, she is reportedly not sanguine about the prospect; yet soon afterwards we see her hard at work improving the manners of her adolescent children; before the Australian emigration, when the eldest son complains that he sings in pubs because he has no profession, Mrs. Micawber “tenderly” interjects that “he means well” (767; ch. 52).

As a mother, Mrs. Micawber is *comically* heroic, but if she were just reducible to Forster’s formula, she would have done little except repeat the “never desert Mr. Micawber” mantra even when her husband menaces their children with a knife and estranges himself from her. Instead, she goes behind his back to enlist the help of their friends, she initiates several adjustments in their circumstances all along, and elastically returns to enjoyment of life as soon as she can.

David is born with a magical provision against drowning (the caul), and unlike Ham and Steerforth, indeed he does not drown. Mrs. Micawber has a different method of protection against capsizing: she inflates herself and her husband with enough optimism to remain sufficiently buoyant to stay afloat. Through such multi-pronged connections, Dickens “refracts, reflects, varies, distorts, reiterates his major themes” (Harvey 98). But Forster did not wish to play this matching game of “doubling one image over another,” superimposing, in Dorothy Van Ghent’s words, “one simple or ‘flat’ character [...] upon another” – or one *situation* upon another – to portray “human complexity” (132–34).

Is Mrs Micawber flat or is she round? Any attempt to answer this question must be linked to questions of point of view, which Forster admitted rather reluctantly into his discussion of character (78). But this fundamental link between character interpretation and point of view comes to the fore in the recent trend of retelling canonical novels from the perspectives of minor characters (Rosen 144). How tempting to retell *David Copperfield* from the point of view of Mrs Micawber! Indeed, There can hardly be stronger evidence of the intrinsic *subjectivity* of defining flatness as incapable of provoking “further probing” (Galef 3).

Forster’s iconoclastic devaluation of Dickens through Mrs. Micawber can be further tested if we imagine how Forster’s examples and definitions would have fared if he had chosen Smollett or even Thackeray to illustrate flatness – though scholars have objected to his definition of Betty Sharp as a round character. I think that if he had used them to define flatness, his formulas would have hardly caught on. They caught because of Forster’s cultural context in Cambridge and Bloomsbury in the 1920s and especially because he targeted a soft spot in the most talented novelist, disingenuously choosing a character who everybody seems to remember but nobody can fully keep in mind. Forster’s narrative displaced Dickens’s, and his delightfully humorous “ramshackle survey,” as he called it, left us useful critical building blocks but also a culture of misreading certain authors.

If *David Copperfield* is primarily about a young individual’s struggle to find love and vocation under uncertain circumstances and despite a traumatic history of abandonment, then Mrs. Micawber plays a crucial role in the *bildungs* that David requires in order to find his way in the world; the relationships he witnesses, especially the married life of the Micawbers, contribute to his ability to navigate his own professional and romantic options. Unavoidably, then, one circles back to the novel’s opening challenge: “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anyone else, these pages must show” (13; ch. 1). They show that Mrs. Micawber, alongside David and others, occupies a heroic stance in a story where she as well as they are half-pathetic and mock-heroic

figures, yet commendable nonetheless.

Mrs. Micawber is made to “stand for so much,” in Alex Woloch’s terms (127), not merely because she provides such vital background for David’s moral and practical education, but [...] above all because she mirrors his character: like him, she is pathetically heroic under trying circumstances; like him, she does not exert herself too much except in support of her immediate family; like him, her main function is to act as a mediator, generally in the direction of good, whenever she can figure out where it lies. If we decide to appraise a literary character by evaluating it in relation to *all* alternative and complementary perspectives offered in a novel, then from its opening gambit, this novel provides a blueprint for precisely such a coordinated operation: a maximalist interpretation of character capable of accounting for a full range of words and deeds in relation to broader themes and structures, even entertaining biographic or literary historical dynamics when relevant; in other words, an elastic approach – in memory of Mrs. Micawber.

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