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'Only Brooks of Sheffield': Conversation, Crossover Writing, and Child and Adult Perspectives in *David Copperfield* and Its Juvenile Adaptations

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In T. J. Clark's poem 'Buildings of England' (2015), a contemporary father reads aloud the opening pages of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) to his daughter. While the first-person poetic speaker intends this to be a bonding experience, it fails miserably: the child refuses to listen to 'the terrible Murdstone chapters', fleeing to her stepmother with the remark, '"I think I am too young to hear this"' (n. pag.). On the one hand, *David Copperfield* features in this poetic conversation as part of a discourse of suitability: a habitual focus in definitions of children's literature (see Wall 3). On the other hand, though, the conversation queries such a discourse, as young Ruby, not her parent, decides what is appropriate for a child to read. Taking up parallel themes to Clark's poem in this article, I analyze the role of conversations between children and adults in both *David Copperfield,* and late Victorian and Edwardian adaptations of it for a juvenile audience. While Dickens's novel was a crossover text (Sandra Beckett's term) that would have been read by a mixed-age audience when it was originally published, the adaptations seem to imagine that children—like the listener in 'Buildings of England'—are 'too young to hear' *David Copperfield:* a situation that impacts both the rendering and the importance of conversation.

The article has three sections. The first focuses on Dickens's original novel. I examine a sequence of moments at which the young David misunderstands or is misled by an adult in a conversation. Conversation is a key staging ground for Dickens's concern with age-based power discrepancies: it can become cruel and imbalanced when participants have different levels of knowledge and expertise, or can remain largely cooperative and respectful despite these differences. The second section turns to adaptations of *David*

Copperfield for children made from the 1890s onwards. Signal strategies of adapters include replacing direct with reported speech, and altering or omitting scenes in which the child David makes inferences or leads an adult interlocutor to a new understanding. In my concluding section, I argue that these changes between *David Copperfield* and the adaptations addressed to children cannot be attributed solely to a concern with intelligibility or suitability. Instead, the adaptations throw new light on the relationship between *David Copperfield* as crossover text, and its use of conversation to dramatize the texture and substance of the young David's experience. Conversational gaps, ambiguities, and obscurities can be interpreted differently by child and adult readers. As such, conversation constitutes a vital metaphor for, and element of, Dickens's technique as a crossover writer.

Conversational Obscurity, Cooperation, and Age in *David Copperfield*

H. P. Grice's famous model of conversation begins from the premise that 'talk exchanges' are cooperative endeavours: 'each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction' (45). Four maxims govern this 'common purpose':

1. Quantity: 'Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)'.
2. Quality: '"Try to make your contribution one that is true"'.
3. Relation: '"Be relevant"'.

4. Manner: "'Be perspicuous'". (Grice 45–46)

The fourth category also comprises sub-maxims including 'Avoid obscurity of expression' and 'Avoid ambiguity' (46). Notably, Grice's signature example of intentional obscurity in conversation—a violation of the usual conversational rules—involves adults and children. 'Suppose,' writes Grice, 'that A and B are having a conversation in the presence of a third party, for example, a child, then A might be deliberately obscure, though not too obscure, in the hope that B would understand and the third party not' (36). In this section, I examine the ways in which conversations take place in a comparable manner in *David Copperfield,* revealing adult power over children and the way this power can be amplified or reduced depending on the conversational participants. I focus exclusively on the novel's opening chapters, both because these chapters are child-focalized (David is around ten at the end of Chapter 14, when he is adopted by Betsey Trotwood) and because the adaptations discussed in the second part of the article typically centre on these chapters, usually excluding David's adult life altogether.

I begin with a scene which was of particular importance to Dickens. In the working notes for the novel—what Dickens called his 'mems'—he wrote 'Brooks of Sheffield' just below his musings on Mr Murdstone's name, which progressed from 'Harden', 'Murdle', and 'Murden' through to its final form (Dickens 2008, 874). Rather than referring to an actual character, 'Brooks of Sheffield' is shorthand for a narrative technique: the conversational manoeuvre that will reveal Murdstone's cruelty to the reader. Shortly after their first meeting,

Murdstone takes David on a trip to Lowestoft. He introduces David to two disreputable gentlemen, who seem about to allude to Murdstone's courtship of Mrs Copperfield.

"Quinion," said Mr. Murdstone, "take care, if you please. Somebody's sharp."

"Who is?" asked the gentleman, laughing.

I looked up, quickly; being curious to know.

"Only Brooks of Sheffield," said Mr. Murdstone.

I was quite relieved to find it was only Brooks of Sheffield; for, at first, I really thought it was I.

There seemed to be something very comical in the reputation of Mr. Brooks of Sheffield, for both the gentlemen laughed heartily when he was mentioned, and Mr. Murdstone was a good deal amused also. After some laughing, the gentleman whom he had called Quinion, said:

"And what is the opinion of Brooks of Sheffield, in reference to the projected business?"

"Why, I don't know that Brooks understands much about it at present," replied Mr. Murdstone; "but he is not generally favorable, I believe."

There was more laughter at this, and Mr. Quinion said he would ring the bell for some sherry in which to drink to Brooks. This he did; and when the wine came, he made me have a little, with a biscuit, and, before I drank it, stand up and say "Confusion to Brooks of Sheffield!" The toast

was received with great applause, and such hearty laughter that it made me laugh too; at which they laughed the more. In short, we quite enjoyed ourselves. (22)

This passage contains marks of David's quick understanding: his inquisitive glance at the men, for example, or his rapid command of new names ('the gentleman whom he had called Quinion'). The famous retrospective narration of *David Copperfield* often presents an interior dialogue between what F. K. Stanzel calls the 'narrating self' (adult) and the 'experiencing self' (child) (212), and here the conversation attests to an opening statement made by the narrating self about childhood: 'I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy' (12–13).

Nonetheless, David cannot become a true conversational participant: like Grice's A and B speaking in front of a young 'third party', the adult characters arrange their discussion so that meaning is apparent among them, but not to David. The specific sentence structures evoke adult power. The causative 'he made me have a little' shows David as subject to Mr Quinion's control, while the clause 'it made me laugh too' is ambiguous because 'it' refers not just to the men's mirth but also indirectly what has caused that mirth, that is, David's own lack of knowledge. Significantly, the narrating self withholds his retrospective awareness of the situation except for in the shadow understanding of the statement, 'At first, I really thought it was I'.[1] This means that when the reader

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[1] The conversation so powerfully showcases oscillating child and adult points-of-view that it has been used to teach high school students about narrative voice (see Byers 1273).

closes the gap in meaning, realizing that David *is* Brooks of Sheffield, they are allied with Murdstone rather than either the narrating or experiencing selves.

In this scene, unequal knowledge also coheres around an age-levelled speech act: the toast. Children can be expected to have limited knowledge of toasts as a conversational mode associated with adult sociability—a fact that Dickens confirms elsewhere by way of scenes of the young David being manipulated or misunderstood in inns. For example, the waiter at a Yarmouth inn invents a cautionary tale involving a second imaginary character, Topsawyer, who dropped dead from drinking in order to trick David into giving him his ale (64), while two innkeepers interrogate David when he orders a pint of ale in London (156). This larger inequality of knowledge—the child's ignorance of a toast's conventions or meaning—is mirrored by the local dynamic of this particular toast, whereby David seems to toast someone outside himself but actually toasts his own 'confusion' or lack of knowledge.

The toast to Brooks of Sheffield involves speech as performance: it presents what Rosemarie Bodenheimer has called 'the display of the child-as-spectacle' (71), with David encouraged to stand up to deliver his salutation so as to heighten its impact. Moreover, the conversation is multi-layered in its theatricality. While David has an audience—three men listening to one child—Murdstone's obscurity is another instance of performance, as it is aimed at Quinion and the second man. An earlier conversation between the young David and multiple adults (Murdstone, but also his mother) continues this latter pattern of adult conversation that makes use of a child.

As my mother stooped down on the threshold to take me in her arms and kiss me, the gentleman said I was a more highly privileged little fellow than a monarch—or something like that; for my later understanding comes, I am sensible, to my aid here. (17)

Murdstone at once assumes too little of the child David (believing that David will not parse the sexually coded remark about his unusual privilege in being allowed to kiss his mother), and is partially correct in his assumption—David indeed cannot quite understand, but understands that he cannot understand. David believes he is part of the conversation, but is not: his follow-up question, "'What does that mean?'", is left unanswered. As in the subsequent 'Brooks of Sheffield' scene, Grice's cooperative principle operates, but does not include the child within its ambit—the dissembling remarks of Murdstone are intended for Mrs Copperfield only, with David remaining a third party. The indirect speech suggests not just the haziness of the memory ('something like that') but also David's incomplete understanding of what happened at the time; the 'later understanding' of the narrating self confirms this, too.

Murdstone fetishizes David's lack of knowledge, making it into a spectacle for adult consumption or utilizing it as an instrument for adult needs. By contrast, other conversations—conversations involving Peggotty—model a respectful management of the different levels of knowledge and information that children and adults may bring to conversation. The first conversation in which David takes part occurs as he sits with Peggotty waiting for his mother to return

from an initially unspecified social engagement.[2] David questions Peggotty about marriage, beginning with, "'Peggotty,'" says I, suddenly, "were you ever married?'", and continuing on to the more pertinent question, "'If you marry a person, and the person dies, why then you may marry another person, mayn't you, Peggotty?'" (16). Peggotty's responses to David suggest discomfort—she 'answer[s] with such a start' at first, 'looks so curiously' at David that he 'look[s] curiously at her', and finally responds with 'a little indecision' that her opinion as to remarriage is "'that I never was married myself, Master Davy, and that I don't expect to be. That's all I know about the subject'" (16). She then hugs David when he worries that she is angered by his questions (17). David as experiencing self observes, 'I couldn't quite understand why Peggotty looked so queer, or why she was so ready to go back to the crocodiles' (17), but the introduction of Murdstone immediately afterwards makes the meaning of Peggotty's discomfort clear to the reader. Positions of unequal knowledge, then, characterize this first conversation between adult and child, as Peggotty knows or suspects something to which David is not privy.

However, Peggotty's manner—her matter-of-fact responses, which do not contain lies and to which she gives careful thought, and her affectionate treatment of David (measured by the two buttons that burst from the back of her dress as she squeezes him)—mitigates this inequality. The context for the scene likewise incarnates Dickens's ideal model of conversations between children and adults, in which the child has legitimacy and even power despite any local or

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[2] Preceding passages of direct speech involve Mrs Copperfield, Betsey Trotwood, Peggotty, and Mr Chillip the doctor, and take place before David is born.

specific lack of knowledge. Dickens seems at first to present a familiar scene of fireside reading: the storytelling tradition of the *veillée,* at which children could 'stay up until they were worn out from playing and listening' to adult tales (Tatar 52). Staying up late is what David calls a 'high treat', a phrase that evokes adult granting of rewards and perhaps, in a foreshadowing of the sadistic Murdstone's arrival, meting out of punishments too (Dickens 2008, 15). But instead of Peggotty reading or telling stories to David, as she does elsewhere, David reads to her. This reversed scene of reading aloud links speech (if not quite conversation) to David's adult vocation and to the power that storytelling has throughout his life, as he takes refuge in such (crossover) texts as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Tobias Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) at the Rookery, at Salem House, and beyond.

The last set of communications in the novel that I shall discuss involves David, Peggotty, and Peggotty's suitor Mr Barkis. Sylvia Manning has written of Peggotty and Barkis that 'protection against the betrayals of language comes, for *[David Copperfield's]* most endearing couple, in silence' (329), and David's role in their courtship involves a cognate mode of communication: not silence, but conversational *displacement*. A final talk exchange then reveals the child's superior understanding to the adult—despite his apparent disobeying of the rules of conversation. From the outset, Barkis involves David in his courtship of Peggotty, but in a way that privileges written language over speech. His proposal comes through David's note containing the phrase 'BARKIS IS WILLING' (61–62), while he chalks Peggotty's name up on his carriage after David tells it to him (103). Meanwhile, David only learns that 'BARKIS IS WILLING' refers to

marriage when he relays the message a second time during a fireside chat. Peggotty begins to laugh hysterically, prompting Mrs Copperfield to question her (105). While David is nominally part of this conversation, he does not speak after his initial contribution; nor does he comment on his new knowledge (except as he infers his mother's ill health from her plea that Peggotty stay with her). It seems, then, that age-levelled knowledge characterizes the conversations around Peggotty's courtship, just as it characterizes the earlier conversations surrounding Murdstone and Mrs Copperfield.

Upon Mrs Copperfield's death and Peggotty's dismissal from the Rookery, though, Peggotty begins to mull over Barkis's proposal more seriously, and asks David what he thinks. After he checks that she will continue in her affection for him, the following conversation takes place:

> "Tell me what should you say, darling?" she asked again, when this was over, and we were walking on.
>
> "If you were thinking of being married—to Mr. Barkis, Peggotty?"
>
> "Yes," said Peggotty.
>
> "I should think it would be a very good thing. For then you know, Peggotty, you would always have the horse and cart to bring you over to see me, and could come for nothing, and be sure of coming."
>
> "The sense of the dear!" cried Peggotty. "What I have been thinking of, this month back!" (133)

In this conversation, David seems to violate Grice's conversational maxim of relation or relevance. He replies to Peggotty with a remark that seems a nonsequitur, or at least non-essential. Who would think access to a horse and cart is the most important consideration in accepting a marriage proposal? At first glance, this conversation evokes what Marah Gubar would call a 'deficit model' of childhood: David seems to '[lack] the abilities, skills, and powers that adults have' (451)—here, the ability to think logically about the benefits and drawbacks of marriage. However, David's blithe response is the precursor to a greater truth: Peggotty recognizes that she will be happier if she is close to David, and to his mother's grave, and if she is her own mistress. Moreover, David mimics the values natural to Peggotty and Barkis: privileging not romance and desire, but the contented state of being 'pretty comfortable' (133). A deficit model shifts to a difference model in which the 'radical alterity' of the child's perspective is an asset (Gubar 451). Peggotty's exclamation 'the sense of the dear' is only partially ironic.

George Goodin has pointed out that Dickens 'presents conversational glitches and breakdowns much more often than do other novelists' (para. 6). In *David Copperfield,* such 'glitches and breakdowns' often relate to age, as the child's experience of a conversation differs (perhaps designedly) from that of an adult. At other moments, though, even as David seemingly violates conversational maxims, his interventions support Dickens's larger point regarding the child's 'powers of observation'—conversation as a vector for the child's differing, yet sometimes superior, perspective to that of the adult.

<u>'Which meant that': Age, Knowledge, and Conversation in *David Copperfield* for</u>

<u>Children</u>

As Brian Alderson and Andrea Immel point out, from 1890 to 1914 British

children's literature refined 'strategies for the appropriation and repackaging of

texts', as juvenile publishers released out-of-copyright Victorian works in new

editions and adaptations (409; see also Fyfe 35–37). Along with earlier canonical

texts by writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare (see

Richmond 2008, 2004), Dickens's original novels became a favourite object for

this treatment. Mary Angela Dickens's juvenile versions of her grandfather's

novels appeared from the 1890s through to the 1920s. The American Book

Company released its Child's Dickens series by Annie Douglas Severance in the

early 1900s. L. L. Weedon's *Child-Characters from Dickens* (*ca.* 1905) grouped

Little Nell with Paul Dombey, Jenny Wren, and the Marchioness. J. Walker

McSpadden's *Stories from Dickens* (1906) offered Dickens's 'most famous boys

and girls, merely separated from the big books and crowded scenes where they

first appeared' (n. pag.). The Children's Dickens series written by Alice F.

Jackson appeared at the same time as both the finely bound, lavishly illustrated

anthology *The Children's Dickens* (*ca.* 1909), and Ethel Lindsay's Dickens Told to

the Children tales.[3]

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[3] Alice F. Jackson's *David Copperfield* (*ca.* 1909) was reviewed alongside *The Children's Dickens*

(*ca.* 1909); see 'Gift Books' 6. All approximate publication dates in this article are suggested by

the British Library.

In this section, I consider the role of conversations between adults and children in juvenile adaptations of *David Copperfield* drawn from this corpus. My key texts are Mary Angela Dickens and Edric Vredenburg's *Little David Copperfield* (*ca.* 1890), Severance's adaptation in a volume that also contained an abridged *Oliver Twist* (*ca.* 1905), Weedon's 'David Copperfield and Little Em'ly' (*ca.* 1905), and Jackson's *David Copperfield* (*ca.* 1909). With the exception of Severance's work, all of these texts finish as David is adopted by Betsey (that is, at the end of Chapter 14). Mostly paying attention to those conversations discussed in the previous section, I explore how knowledge is revealed to, concealed from, or discovered by the child David through conversation.

The children's adaptations, like Dickens's original novel, are concerned with David's knowledge and how this plays out in conversation. Sometimes, such moments can be reproduced almost wholesale. After Murdstone locks David up for biting his hand in *David Copperfield,* Peggotty comes to visit him and whispers through the keyhole: '"Be as soft as a mouse, or the Cat'll hear us"'; David notes: 'I understood this to mean Miss Murdstone, and was sensible of the urgency of the case; her room being close by' (Dickens 2008, 57). Dickens shows the experiencing self, and not the narrating self, making an inference here: the child comes to knowledge of the meaning of 'cat'. This inference appears as follows in three adaptations:

David understood she meant Miss Murdstone, whose room was quite near. (Dickens and Vredenburg 12)

David knew that she meant Miss Murdstone. (Jackson 33)

By the cat she meant Miss Murdstone, whose room was quite near.

(Weedon 22)

In the first two examples, understanding of what is implied by the word *cat*

resides with the child character: 'David knew' or 'David understood'. Mary

Angela Dickens and Vredenburg also provide further information to the reader,

that is, why David 'understood' this—the proximity of Miss Murdstone's room to

the room where he is imprisoned—implying the logicality of David's deduction.

By contrast, in Weedon's text, such knowledge belongs to the third-person

narrator, who has an overview not just of the house and the position of rooms

within it but also of Peggotty's intention: 'By the cat she meant'. The first and

second examples offer a symbolic position of power to the child reader, as it is the

child character who knows; in the third, by contrast, the narrator possesses

knowledge and directly states it to the child reader, bypassing David. This is in

line with Weedon's framing of the scene itself, which explains David's action in

biting Murdstone in terms of the 'shame and rage and all the pent-up miseries

he had endured' (21) rather than letting readers infer his motivation for

themselves. Conversation does not model the knowledge-making work it does in

the original novel because the narrator has knowledge, not the child character.

While adapters show differing assumptions about the level of inference of

which child readers are capable, moments when differentials in knowledge and

failures of inference pose even greater difficulty. Two of the adaptations include

versions of the 'Brooks of Sheffield' scene. In 'David Copperfield', Severance writes:

> Mr. Murdstone told them to take care, as somebody was sharp. David looked up quickly at this, for he was anxious to know who it was. Mr. Murdstone said it was only "Brooks of Sheffield" and David was relieved, for at first he really thought they had been speaking of himself.
>
> There seemed to be something very funny about Mr. Brooks of Sheffield, for all the gentlemen laughed when he was mentioned, and one of them asked what was the opinion of Brooks of Sheffield about the business of which they were talking. Mr. Murdstone replied that he believed he did not regard it favorably. Then there was more laughter, and they made David stand up and drink a glass of wine and say, "Confusion to Brooks of Sheffield!" At this the laughter was heartier than ever, and they all seemed to be enjoying themselves as they looked over some papers. (12)

Severance includes the same essential information as Dickens, both in terms of speech acts (Murdstone's intentional obscurity and its reception by the other adult characters, as well as David's unknowing auto-toast) and interpretation (David's relief that the men were not talking about him). She also solicits the same work of the reader, that is, for the reader to recognize what is not directly stated and to discover that Brooks is an alter ego for David. Nonetheless, conversation is less important in Severance's version. For example, she favours

reported speech over direct speech, removing the differentiated voices of the characters, in particular that of Quinion, who speaks with a flourish.

More significantly, though, Severance alters the dynamic of knowledge in the scene. Compare 'The toast was received with great applause, and such hearty laughter that it made me laugh too; at which they laughed the more' (Dickens) with 'At this the laughter was heartier than ever, and they all seemed to be enjoying themselves' (Severance). As noted above, the ironic distance separating David and Murdstone's understanding of their conversation is the source of adult laughter in the original. By contrast, Severance's adaptation embeds adult obscurity into the (now third-person) narration: the qualified observation that the men 'seemed' to be enjoying themselves is the only one possible, and David does not believe he knows what they are laughing about. While Severance minimizes the original scene's ironies in an effort to simplify and clarify it for child readers, this also has the subsidiary effect of making the adult laughter seem nonsensical.

Compare with Jackson's adaptation of this scene. The initial conversation between Murdstone and the men is given almost in full, including the opening sally, "'Halloa, Murdstone! We thought you were dead!'", and Murdstone's reply, "'Not yet'" (Dickens 2008, 22; see Jackson [1909], 10). Jackson preserves some of the scene's conversational texture—the frisson of the men's bold and rough address to Murdstone—but by contrast omits Brooks of Sheffield.

"Take care, if you please," said Mr. Murdstone; "somebody's sharp."

They walked about on the cliff after that, and sat on the grass, and looked out of a telescope, and then came back to the hotel to an early dinner; and then they were on the yacht. (10)

As in both Dickens's original scene and Severance's adaptation of it, the conversation contains the implicature 'somebody's sharp', with the reader cued to fill the gap as to who 'somebody' is. However, by omitting the ensuing discussion and David's failure to comprehend the second implicature, 'Brooks of Sheffield', Jackson leaves Murdstone's statement un-ironized and unchallenged: a simple declaration of David's intelligence. As in the 'cat' scene, this assessment might also extend to the child reader who infers who 'somebody', bringing their own sharpness to the scene in decoding Murdstone's statement and thus taking on a position of power.

Adaptations of the final major set of examples from the previous section—those involving Peggotty, David, and Mr Barkis—take variable approaches to conversation, age, and knowledge. In the original text, David comes to understand what 'Barkis is willing' means by way of the conversation between Mrs Copperfield and Peggotty; once more, the statement's meaning is not given explicitly, but worked out by the reader. The children's adapters tend to close this gap. For instance, Mary Angela Dickens and Vredenburg write, 'David found out that the mysterious message meant that Barkis wanted to marry her, and Peggotty had consented' (Dickens and Vredenburg 21), and Severance expresses it thus: 'as Peggotty had long had a liking for Mr. Barkis, and, indeed, had secretly been "willin'" herself for some time, it took little persuading on the part

of the carrier to induce her to marry him' (25). Even as the original message is coded to David in these adaptations—either mysterious (Dickens and Vredenburg) or associated with secrecy (Severance)—the implicature is removed by the narrator. Weedon even makes the moment of relaying the message and of having its meaning revealed simultaneous: 'the carrier begged David to tell her when he wrote, "Barkis is willin'," which meant that he was willing to marry her if she would have him, but he was too shy to say so himself' (23). Weedon's narrator does not just clarify meaning but also character motivation (Barkis's shyness). This means that even when adapters include David's final agential exchange with Peggotty, in which he gives his blessing to the marriage (see Jackson 93, Weedon 28–29), they de-emphasize the conversational process by which David deciphers ambiguous adult communications such as 'BARKIS IS WILLING'.

Conversation is less significant to the adaptations than to the original novel, both in terms of the amount of direct speech and in the ways that David comes to new knowledge through conversation. These points are inflected, though, by the most significant change in the adaptations: the shift in narrative voice. The retrospective narration in *David Copperfield* turns on the differing perceptions of David's past and present selves, staging a 'tension between the older, matured and more sensible "I" as narrator and the "I" as hero, still completely engrossed in his situation' (Stanzel 82). As William Lankford writes, *David Copperfield's* 'central problem of both theme and form' is 'the need to assimilate the child's perception and the adult's understanding' (456). This impacts the handling of conversational exchanges in the original novel, as at

moments already noted (such as that mentioning 'later understanding' of Murdstone's first remark), the adult narrating self glosses the child David's conversational experiences. In this way, the structure of retrospection in *David Copperfield* is what Maria Nikolajeva calls *aetonormative* (16): the interior dialogue between young and mature selves positions adult understandings as the norm, childhood experiences as provisional.

By contrast, adapters—including not just those already discussed but also others not mentioned (Shirley)—switch from first- to third-person narration, thus removing this hierarchy between child and adult.[4] At the same time, though, a different type of aetonormativity often creeps in: the third-person narrator, who is implicitly adult, possesses knowledge superior even to the narrating self of the original novel, glossing not just the meanings behind but also the motivations for adult conversation. In *David Copperfield,* the experiencing child self actively pursues meaning-making through conversation even as adult communication is oblique or difficult to parse. In the adaptations, the narrator presents conversational knowledge fully formed.

Crossover Conversations

Most novels were read by both children and adults in the nineteenth century in a phenomenon variously called *crossover writing* (Beckett), *cross-writing* (U. C.

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[4] Critics of the adaptations sometimes objected to this alteration, as when one reviewer commented of Jackson's *David Copperfield* that 'nothing essential is altered or left out, though David's history suffers a little perhaps from the change into the third person' ('Gift Books' 6).

Knoepflmacher and Mitzi Myers), and the *mixed-age* (Teresa Michals) or *dual-address* (Barbara Wall) novel. While scholars including Beverly Lyon Clark and Felicity Hughes have explored the process by which this changed in detail, Dickens's works were even more closely associated with young readers than the novels of many of his contemporaries, as Michals points out (139). In the words of one fin-de-siècle commentator, Dickens was 'the novelist of child-life' (Wright 380). Within this narrative, *David Copperfield* is especially prominent, both historically and theoretically. The *UK Reading Experience Database* offers evidence of the novel's child readership in the Victorian period.[5] Moreover, because the experiencing self is a child for a significant proportion of the novel, *David Copperfield* is an example of how '"cross-writing" is facilitated by nineteenth-century adult authors' fondness for using child characters' (Nelson 78); *David Copperfield* is a sometime reference point for cross-writing for critics (see Beckett 19, Wall 1).

Children continued to enjoy Dickens's novels long after his death in 1870.[6] Nonetheless, the assumption that young people could read them in their original form had shifted by the late nineteenth century, with the juvenile adaptations

[5] See, for example, the *UK Reading Experience Database* records for George Acorn (number 2368), Neville Cardus (number 3225), and H. M. Swanwick (number 4727).

[6] For testaments to Dickens's popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see a survey published in 1888 in which young people aged between 11 and 19 often listed him as their favourite author, with *David Copperfield* the favourite text among girls (Salmon 14, 21), or an appendix to the 1921 Newbolt Report which shows Dickens as the most popular writer in circulation in London schools (*Teaching of English,* 375).

bearing witness to what Wall calls 'a phenomenon of the twentieth century': the single address that results from 'a change in the attitudes of adults writing for children which took place about the turn of the century' (36). In this final section, I change tack: reflecting not on the conversational details of the texts just discussed, but on how the transformed conversational exchanges in the adaptations reflects this movement from cross-written to single-address text.

In part, editing down conversations may reflect the simple and pressing impetus to abridge Dickens's novels, as children are assumed unable or unwilling to read longer texts.[7] Adapters sometimes make this assumption explicit, as when McSpadden refers to Dickens's novels as 'bulky volumes which so often alarm young people by their very size' (n. pag.), or when Severance takes aim at Dickens's 'discursiveness' (3). The typographical convention of offsetting conversations line by line means they take up more physical space than other parts of a text, and reported speech in children's adaptations can be read as a strategy for condensing conversations while keeping conversation as narrative device relatively intact. From the other side, the greater length of Jackson's *David Copperfield*—156 pages—accommodates a higher number of passages of direct speech.

Considering the adapters' other major concern, though, the exclusion of conversation is surprising. Severance pairs 'discursiveness' with 'elements of

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[7] Present-day debates over how much young people can or should read sometimes have parallel recourse to Victorian literature, as, for instance, when N. Katherine Hayles gives 'a novel by Dickens' as the quintessential object for deep reading, as opposed to what she calls the hyper attention preferred by undergraduates (187).

unpleasantness' as the aspect of Dickens's novels she wishes to redress (3). In fact, because a mixed-age audience was assumed for the Victorian novel, Dickens (like his contemporaries) already veils sexual content in his novels. This is clearly visible in child-centred works such as, for example, *Oliver Twist* (1838), which could be read by both children and adults despite its featuring of the prostitute Nancy as a key character. As Dickens wrote in his 1841 preface to the novel, 'I endeavoured, while I painted it in all its fallen and degraded aspect, to banish from the lips of the lowest character I introduced, any expression that could by possibility offend' (1966, lxi). Such expressive codes are an insurance policy for young readers in particular.

David Copperfield does comprise sexual content that adapters exclude. The plot involving little Em'ly's seduction by Steerforth is conveniently removed when adapters end with David's adoption, for instance—sometimes to quite staggering effect, as in the compression of the ending given by Mary Angela Dickens and Vredenburg.

> When you are older you can read how [David] grew up to be a good, clever man, and met again all his old friends, and made many new ones. Also, what became of Steerforth, Traddles, the Peggottys, little Em'ly, and the Micawbers. (38)

The child reader who returns to *David Copperfield* in adulthood may be surprised to learn 'what became of' many of these characters. By contrast, conversation in-builds cross-writing techniques, as adult characters adjust their

expression when in the earshot of child characters—just as the nineteenth-century novelist cross-writes to a mixed-age audience. (It is not incidental that many of the conversations discussed in the first section centre on marriage and thus implicitly sexual knowledge.) This means that conversations might have been retained in the children's adaptations.

In conclusion, then, I argue that the omission and adjustment of conversation in the adaptations relates to the change in audience. Many of the conversations between the child David and adult characters in *David Copperfield* are structured around what Aidan Chambers calls tell-tale gaps: those spaces in a text that 'the reader must fill before the meaning can be complete' (10). When the narrating adult self withholds his retrospective awareness of meaning—'I was quite relieved to find it was only Brooks of Sheffield', 'I couldn't quite understand why Peggotty looked so queer', or even simply '"What does that mean?"'—these gaps cue the reader to recognize and correct the deficiencies of the experiencing child self. But because Dickens's novels are crossover texts, these lacunae are different from those imagined in most reader-response criticism: they may be filled or approached differently by children and adults. Such gaps may even lead to a more expansive sense of identity in reader response. As Beckett writes of the crossover text, 'Children may not understand all the layers of meaning in these works, but then neither do all adults, and that is not necessary when readers are gripped by the story' (19); Michals goes further in arguing that the 'mixed' audience of the nineteenth-century novel was imagined to be servants and women as often as children. Conversations are important in *David Copperfield* because they embed concerns apposite to the

cross-writer into the narrative: the working through of age-levelled and identity-marked understandings and meaning-making. As soon as many different readers are not assumed or addressed at once—as in the adaptations—unequal knowledge positions are not of the same thematic interest, and can be dispensed with.

Moreover, the different conversations in the early chapters of *David Copperfield* furnish an ethics of cross-writing. One model involves wilful obscurity, as seen in conversations where Murdstone misleads David not just by encoding his meaning but more systematically by allowing David to think he is a conversational participant when he is only a 'third party'. These conversations recall the type of cross-writing that John Rowe Townsend once dubbed, with reference to J. M. Barrie, 'the author [. . .] winking over the children's heads to the adults' (77). In other conversations, though, even as imbalances of knowledge persist sensitive adults mitigate or minimize them. These conversations model a sympathetic cross-writer who views gaps in knowledge not as intractable and constant, but variable—cross-writing as an 'alliance or collaboration [. . .] between adult and child' voices (Knoepflmacher 25).

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