

**A buried childhood
in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield***

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Abstract

Charles Dickens's autobiographical novel *David Copperfield* devotes much space to the protagonist's childhood. By analyzing structural relationships of spatial elements in the artistic world of Dickens's novel the article focuses on the motif of childhood home in relation to such spatial images as churchyard, elm-trees, garden, rookery and Never-never land. Childhood in *David Copperfield* is associated with death only on the plot level through the motifs of David's early trauma of loss, but also owing to numerous metaphors constructed through language expressions as well as through imagery and motifs. Moreover, the motif of childhood home indicates the heavenly home (or nest) where we go – in the sense of homecoming – after death.

Key words

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, death, childhood, space, home

Pogrzebane dzieciństwo w *Dawidzie Copperfieldzie* Karola Dickensa

Abstrakt

Dawid Copperfield, autobiograficzna powieść Karola Dickensa poświęca wiele miejsca motywowi dzieciństwa protagonisty. Analiza strukturalnych relacji przestrzennych elementów w artystycznym świecie powieści koncentruje się na przestrzeni domu rodzinnego w relacji do przestrzennych obrazów cmentarza, wiazów, ogrodu, gawronich gniazd i Nibylandii. Motyw dzieciństwa łączy się w powieści ze śmiercią nie tylko na poziomie fabuły poprzez motywy dziecięcej traumy i osierocenia Dawida, ale także dzięki wielości metafor konstruowanych na poziomie języka oraz poprzez obrazowanie i ekwiwalencje motywów. Ponadto, dom rodzinny wskazuje w powieści na niebo, gdzie wszyscy powracamy – jak do domu – po śmierci.

Słowa kluczowe

Charles Dickens, *Dawid Copperfield*, śmierć, dzieciństwo, przestrzeń, dom

We are all children and I'm the youngest
Charles Dickens

1. Introduction

Charles Dickens's contemplation of childhood by adult consciousness can be considered as nostalgia for his own lost childhood.¹ If this is indeed the case, such nostalgia haunts him throughout his autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*,

¹ Compare: "Dickens's hard experiences in boyhood [...] were clearly felt by him to have rung down the curtain on the innocence of his own childhood and also to have been critically determining of his adult character [...] Pity for his own lost childhood undoubtedly made him especially receptive to the Wordsworthian conception of childhood" (R. Newsom's "Fictions of childhood" in Jordan 2001: 93).

first published as a book in 1850. Nostalgia is literally the pain of wanting to return home, not only to a private inner world of recollections, but also to the original home which will make the soul no longer a wanderer. Dickens's domestic ideology expressed in his narratives has his own theological dimension² according to which in the face of death we can find the Father and the Home for which everyone longs. In this article I intend to analyse structural relationships of spatial elements in the artistic world of Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*, focusing on the presented space of childhood home. I will consider the motif of childhood home in relation to such spatial images as churchyard, elm-trees, garden, rookery and Never-never land.

David Copperfield's parental home is created by the chain of paradigmatic elements linked by the semantics of "loss". The predominant motif of "loss" as the equivalent of "death" concerns specific family relationship of parent and child. *David Copperfield* is prevalently focused on the maternal aspect in terms of constant longing for the maternal nest and memory of the lost "happy home". Dickens clearly presents the protagonist's house in the metaphorical and metonymic relation with the deserted/empty nest. The parallel house – nest as well as its variants: man – house / birds – nests imply a sequence of correlated images: elm-trees – family tree, rooks' nests – family home, deserted rookery – deserted home. These images are influenced by semantics of non-being in terms of emptiness or absence of certain spatial elements. The most significant example of non-being is Dickens's depiction of disappearing

² Compare: "while Dickens's concept of God is not expressed or formulated in terms of a systematic theology, it is solidly Scriptural, at least according to the popular Scriptural understanding of his day. Clearly, Dickens's concept of God is Christian and typically Anglican in the popular sense [...], his concept of God taken by itself is determinative of little more than affirming his theism. Taken in the larger context, however, of both the nineteenth century and his writing [...] his concept of God tells us a great deal about his faith and his Christian convention [...]" (Colledge 2009: 57). And also "for Dickens, death seems to be simply the passage from his earthly life to the eternal happiness of heaven and reunion with loved ones and family" (2009: 59).

rooks that precedes the protagonist's birth and can be perceived as the indication of the destruction of the family home. The idea of non-being signifies the motif of the lost childhood home as the allegory of a "buried" childhood that is frequently introduced by the author with reference to biblical, mythological, and folkloristic traditions. The consideration of the key spatial images in the present article is divided into the following parts: Churchyard, Elm-trees, Lost garden, Deserted rookery and Never-never land.

2. Churchyard

David Copperfield's first recollection of his childhood is connected with two interrelated places: the house and the churchyard. These two spaces function as thresholds because of their connection to birth and death as two linked stages of existence. Looking back on his infancy, David says:

I lay in my basket, and my mother lay in her bed; but [my father] Betsey Trotwood Copperfield was forever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled; and the light upon the window of our room shone out upon the earthly bourne of all such travellers, and the mound above the ashes and the dust that once was he, without whom I had never been. (Dickens 2011: 22)

In the above passage the syntagmatic relation of spatial images: basket, bed and mound creates a link between the house and the churchyard, and implies a temporal connection between birth and death. Additionally, Dickens alludes to the eternal existence of the soul by introducing dream imagery: "the land of dreams and shadows". It is significant that during his recollections "David has the ability to back far enough away from his own life to put it into perspective as a progress through time, with a definite beginning and ending marking out his own little stake in eternity" (Newcomb 1989: 85). In

a later passage, David Copperfield expresses it in the words, “the memory of most of us can go further back into such times than many of us suppose” (Dickens 2011: 23). According to Lynn Cain’s explanations:

David Copperfield’s attempt to recapture childhood in the face of death is part of a long artistic tradition in Western culture of regarding the child as an emblem of mortality [...] As Dickens’s contemporaries were well aware, the Bible exhorted a return to childhood to merit admittance to the kingdom of heaven. Consequently death and the afterlife signified a return to early childhood as the spirit was cleansed of mortal sin through salvation and returned to the purity of infancy. By extension, childhood was retrospectively experienced as an intimation of death and the afterlife. (2008: 113-114)

The protagonist’s dream-like motion expressed in the phrase “I had so lately travelled” suggests the temporal aspect in terms of the opposition of “eternal life” and “mortality”. On the spatial level the shining light indicates heaven and correlates with “the ashes and the dust” signifying the earth. This correlation creates an equivalence between the dream/death and awakening that may refer to the motif of entering the stream of life in the sense of rebirth. The interplay of the metonymic “window of our room” (that is, the house as a parental home) and the metaphorical image of “the mound” (that is, the grave) creates the earthly sphere, and suggests a return from the sphere of death because the child’s creation and the demise merge in the person of its parent. The evoked religious connotations of birth/life/death/afterlife in the context of childhood are close to Romantic ideas. For William Wordsworth the child was “imagined as literally closer to the divine [...], peculiarly and even incongruously a figure of some authority (The Child is Father of the Man)” (Jordan 2001: 94).

In *David Copperfield*, the correlated images of “death” and “birth” as the threshold of ending and beginning are presented

explicitly in the plot event of “a posthumous birth” (the birth of the child after the father’s death). David speaks about his strange feelings in connection with his childhood home in the initial description:

I was born in Blunderstone, in Suffolk, or ‘there by’, as they say in Scotland. I was a posthumous child. My father’s eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months, when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me, even now, in the reflection that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were – almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes – bolted and locked against it. (Dickens 2011: 11)

The idea of “death-in-birth” is depicted by the connection with human body parts – ‘eyes’, and simultaneously with the space of parental house. The third sentence of the quoted passage establishes a parallel which can be also perceived as an opposition: “closed father’s eyes” / “open my eyes”. On the spatial level this opposition can be seen in terms of “bolted and locked” doors for him / open for me. The door as the boundary between the house and churchyard is also the border between death and “birth-life” that is emphasized by the opposition of syntagmatic sequences of images: his white grave-stone – out – alone – dark night / our little parlour – warm and bright – fire and candle. These sequences can refer to the equivalence between the space of the house and the space of churchyard on the semantic level. According to Lotman,

borders, in general, have a separating as well as connecting function – they do not only divide but also bring together what is different – and are therefore of extremely ambivalent nature. (Hansen 1994: 34)

In view of the connecting function of the boundary, the space of David's childhood is constituted not only by the house, but also by the churchyard, both determined by semantics of death.

Significantly, the semantics of death in David's childhood space seems to be emphasized by the onomastic aspect. The place name "Blunderstone" can be divided into two words with allegorical interrelation between: "blunder" and "stone". Considering etymological references, the word "Blunder [...] formed (as frequentative) from Icel. 'blunda', to doze, slumber; Swed. 'blunda', to shut the eyes; Dan. 'blunde' to nap" (Skeat 2005: 53). The etymological connection of the word 'blunder' with "the allegorical personification of the dream, [...] brother of Death (Greek thanatos)" (Biedermann 1992: 180-181) corresponds with Dickens's imagery. It is crucial that Dickens deliberately modifies the real name "Blundeston" by adding two letters to create: "blunder-stone" (death-grave) imagery.³ In this connection 'Blunder-stone' echoes with 'murd(er)-stone' semantics in correlation to death. The interplay that relies on association of the cold stone and the frozen rigidity of death contained in the surname Murdstone of David's stepfather. As Ruth Danon writes:

David's mother [...] cannot seem to recover from the death of David's father and even the name of the man she chooses to replace him implies that her passions are directed towards the grave. David associates Blunderstone with everything inimical to life. (Danon 1985: 55)

Dickens's distinctive use of language relies on creating similes and metaphors based on what he could have observed in his surroundings. Thus, the space of David's house and the

³ According to *Dickens Encyclopedia*, "The name is a thin disguise for the village of Blundeston, which Dickens visited in 1848 [...] The name, seen on a signpost, attracted his attention, and he adapted it for the novel he was then contemplating" (Hayward 1968: 33).

churchyard is conditioned by the sensual imagery omnipresent in Dickens's works. According to Barbara Hardy,

David believes that a good memory has its source in close keen observation, and the novel often draws attention to acts of seeing and the ability to infer inside from outside [...]. (Hardy 2008: 49)

As an example, the motif of reading / hearing appears repeatedly in David's early remembrances of childhood. It is clearly connected with the reading crocodile book by Peggotty, reading his father's novels by David, and reading the Bible by his mother. In David's recollections of childhood the modes of hearing and seeing correspond to the motif of reading / telling / looking through the window which is the spatial border between the house and churchyard. The correspondences are established in the following passage:

There is something of a doleful air about that room to me, for Peggotty has told me – I don't know when, but apparently ages ago – about my father's funeral, and the company having their black cloaks put on. One Sunday night my mother reads to Peggotty and me in there, how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. And I am so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take me out of bed, and show me the quiet churchyard out of the bedroom window, with the dead all lying in their graves at rest, below the solemn moon. (Dickens 2011: 24)

The story of Lazarus miracle is placed in the context of preaching the Gospel, but simultaneously the act of showing David the churchyard out of the window evokes mythological connotations. According to Cain's interpretation,

The image uncannily recalls David's Oedipal fears of parental resurrection expressed through his response to the parable of Lazarus. (2008: 104)

The child's fear gives the Gospel story ambiguous connotations which seem close to Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque ambivalence as mingling of "high culture" with the profane by alternative voices within the carnivalized literary text. Sue Vice writes:

Bakhtin describes the literary genre, originally medieval, of 'grotesque realism' as one opposed to all forms of high art and literature. [...] it is worth noting that Bakhtin sees the carnivalesque view of death as a way combatting 'real' everyday and religious fears of death in Middle Ages, conjured up by natural, 'divine and human power'. (Vice 1997: 154-155)

3. Elm-trees

The space of the house-and-churchyard is defined by the dividing and uniting spatial function of trees in terms of up and down relations. The image of the trees is a constituent of the syntagmatic chain of landscape elements. David describes the churchyard where the shady trees as well as green grass and quiet tombstones are extraordinary and may be even seen as close to the miraculous thus suggesting a vision of heaven:

There is nothing half so green that I know anywhere, as the grass of that churchyard; nothing half so shady as its trees; nothing half so quiet as its tombstones. (Dickens 2011: 24)

The function of trees as a link between the space of earth and the space of heaven in Dickens's artistic world accords with the image of trees in Biblical tradition:

Used since early classical times to suggest genealogical relationships, the tree appears in Scripture to depict the destiny of an individual [...]. Early Christian writers commented extensively on the doctrinal meaning and theological relationships of these biblical trees, and extrapolated from them a composite symbolic tree which embodied the major Christian doctrines and mysteries. (Jeffrey 1992: 779)

In symbolic terms, a connection between (elm) trees and the churchyard appears in English poetry. Thomas Gray speaks of the “rugged elms” of the country churchyard in *Elegy* 13 (Ferber 2007: 69). In Gray’s poem it embodies a meditation on death, and remembrance after death. The elm-trees in Dickens’s artistic space also reveal folkloristic connotations. The trees are described by David as half-human creatures that have access to mysteries and are able to predict fate. The narrator shows the garden landscape on the eve of David’s birth in the following way:

The evening wind made such a disturbance just now, among some tall old elm-trees at the bottom of the garden, that neither my mother nor Miss Betsey could forbear glancing that way. As the elms bent to one another, like giants who were whispering secrets, and after a few seconds of such repose, fell into a violent flurry, tossing their wild arms about, as if their late confidences were really too wicked for their peace of mind, some weatherbeaten ragged old rooks’-nests, burdening their higher branches, swung like wrecks upon a stormy sea. (Dickens 2011: 14)

In the above passage Dickens seems to bring together literary connotations of the tree in the Bible that often stands for a person (Ferber 2007: 219) with a mythological reference to “specific trees or an entire grove revered in many ancient civilizations as the abodes of supernatural beings” (Biedermann 1989: 350). On the dynamic level “the nests burdening the higher branches of the elm-trees”, “swinging like wrecks upon a stormy sea” might be perceived as a configuration that foreshadows the destabilization of David’s home as well as dangers and tragedies of his future life. His existence is metaphorically suspended between life and death.

4. Lost Garden

The garden trees that surround David's parental house as well as old rooks'-nests on them constitute an allusion to a family nest. The association of nest – tree – parenthood is common in English literature:

If it taken literally, the trope should indicate the soft lining of the nest provided by the parent birds for the greater comfort and protection of their tender young nestlings, creating the sort of emotional response evinced by George Eliot's description of Silas Marner's parenting [...]. (Cain 2008: 20)

Moreover, in the description of David's childhood space the elm-trees seem juxtaposed with the garden fruit-trees. In the following passage “the ragged old rooks'-nests still dangling in the elm-trees” might be considered as the opposition to “the fruit clusters” in terms of emptiness and fullness:

And now I see the outside of our house, with the latticed bedroom-windows standing open to let in the sweet-smelling air, and the ragged old rooks'-nests still dangling in the elm-trees at the bottom of the front garden. Now I am in the garden at the back, beyond the yard where the empty pigeon-house and dog-kennel are – a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it, with a high fence, and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden, and where my mother gathers some in a basket, while I stand by, bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved. A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. (Dickens 2011: 25)

The Edenic quality of being: “the sweet-smelling air”, the imagery of trees bearing fruit pleasant to the sight and David's mother gathering some (like Eve) refer to the earthly, or childish, Eden. This way of describing childhood is common in the literary context:

This pattern, with the interiorization of the lost Eden, governs the plots of many works of modern literature. Wordsworth's autobiographical epic *The Prelude* begins with an Edenic moment – *O there is blessing in this gentle breeze / That blows from the green fields [...]* – and soon describes his Edenic childhood in gardenly terms: *Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grow up / Fostered alike by beauty and my fear, / Much favoured in my birthplace, and no less / In that beloved vale to which erelong / I was transplanted.* (Ferber 2007: 85)

In his recollections of the garden David says: “a great wind rises and the summer is gone”; later he will explicitly describe the idyllic garden as a childish “paradise lost”:

Ah, what a strange feeling it was to be going home when it was not home, and to find that every object I looked at, reminded me of the happy old home, which was like a dream I could never dream again! [...] and soon I was at our house, where the bare old elm-trees wrung their many hands in the bleak wintry air, and shreds of the old rooks' nests drifted away upon the wind. (Dickens 2011: 124)

The contrast of the winter image in the quotation above with the summer image in the previously cited passage confirms the ambiguous position of David's family home as situated between life (metaphorically expressed by summer) and death (winter).

In the recollections of the lost childhood home Dickens introduces acoustical imagery of David's mother's singing:

God knows how infantine the memory may have been, that was awakened within me by the sound of my mother's voice in the old parlour, when I set foot in the hall. (Dickens 2011: 124)

To exemplify Dickens's mode of transforming visual images into audible sounds, we can trace the relation between David's mother gathering fruit in the garden and her singing in the

house. It is essential that in the earlier quoted passage David is standing in the garden and describes the “latticed windows” of the house, which may suggest a cage. As Martin A. Danahay suggests, since women were expected both to sing and to look beautiful, they were frequently associated with songbirds in cages. Friedrich Nietzsche (in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 237) extends the metaphor of women as birds to suggest that they have to be locked up in cages. The connection of women and caged birds was also established in Victorian poetry (Danahay 2007: 110). Thus David’s recollection of his mother’s singing may metaphorically suggest her imprisonment in the cage-like house by evoking the common metaphor of woman as a bird. Danahay also suggests a liminal position of the woman situated between home and garden.

Additionally, as Ivan Kreilkamp states:

Dickens describes a decided similarity between human and animal [...]. The question of human likeness to the animal is, of course, a fundamental one in both ethical and biological thinking of animal-human relations. (Kreilkamp 2007: 85-87)

Looking back to his childhood from the distance of time, David says: “the influence of the Murdstones upon me was like the fascination of two snakes on a wretched young bird” (Dickens 2011: 67). Like David, his mother is also under the influence of the Murdstones. Clara’s relationship with her husband suggests a spatially metaphorical transfer from the Edenic garden to the “latticed” space of the cage – the sign of imprisonment. In David’s childhood world Dickens consistently indicates an analogy between birds and the members of David’s family, including his mother. Remembering his childhood while wandering through the streets in Canterbury, David recalls his mother and the rooks that are associated with love and protectiveness in his pre-Murdstone childhood:

[...] under all the [...] difficulties of my journey, I seemed to be sustained and led on by my fanciful picture of my mother [...]. It always kept me company. I have associated it, ever since, with the sunny street of Canterbury [...] and the stately, grey Cathedral, with the rooks sailing round the towers. (Dickens 2011: 208)

5. Deserted rookery

The ornithological imagery associated with David's family and parental home is also introduced by Dickens owing to the name of the house – "Rookery". The origin of the name is explained in the following exchange:

'In the name of Heaven', said Miss Betsey, suddenly, 'why Rookery?' [...] 'Do you mean the house, ma'am?' asked my mother. [...] 'The name was Mr. Copperfield's choice', returned my mother. 'When he bought the house, he liked to think that there were rooks about it'. (Dickens 2011: 14)

The name, originating in the father's liking for the birds introduces a positive aspect while the usual associations of rooks are rather negative since the black birds related to crows and ravens are symbolically connected with death (Ferber 2007: 167-168). Thus the ambivalent semantics of the birds introduced here relies on their connection with the father implying protection and care on the one hand and with death on the other.

What is more, Miss Betsey's exclamatory "In the name of Heaven" syntactically hints at a relation between Heaven and Rookery, which further entails an implied connection between the name of Mr. Copperfield and the name of God. As usual, Dickens associates the belief in God with the belief in a good father. In this context David's words: "without whom I had never been" may constitute a double allusion to his father and the Godfather (Dickens 2011: 22).

The negative aspect of the Rookery is undoubtedly emphasized by Dickens through the motif of emptiness in the image of the deserted nests. As David's mother explains:

We thought – Mr. Copperfield thought – it was quite a large rookery; but nests were very old ones, and the birds have deserted them a long while. (Dickens 2011: 15)

The deserted birds' nests, an equivalent of a deserted family home, suggests the motif of homelessness. Its function is conditioned by the recurrence of spatial elements emphasizing the motif of emptiness of the house. To begin with David's earliest remembrance:

On the ground-floor is Peggotty's kitchen, opening into a back yard; with a pigeon-house on a pole, in the centre, without any pigeons in it; a great dog-kennel in a corner, without any dog... (Dickens 2011: 24)

The chain of paradigmatic images: "deserted nests" – "a pigeon-house, without any pigeons in it" – "a great dog-kennel [...] without any dog" might be treated as a kind of metaphorical code signifying a deserted home as a mark of death of the family members. The links between David's father's death, his mother's death, his baby-brother's death and "deserted rook's nests", an empty "pigeon-house" and "a dog-kennel" imply that the space of the protagonist's childhood is determined by emptiness and loss.

As Lynn Cain explains:

Without doubt, David's *Künstlerroman* resounds to the echo of Dickens's own increasing sense of desolation, emptiness and loss which, ultimately, register the loss of the primal mother [...]. Death and loss pervade the novel and many of those whom David loves – his mother Clara, his first love Em'ly, his youthful homoerotic attachment Steerforth, his child-bride Dora – all die either actually or symbolically during the novel [...]. To speak of the 'death' or 'loss' of Clara is really to commit a solecism for, despite

David's vivid memories of her, she is always an absence rather than a presence. Even before his birth, the empty nests at Blunderstone foreshadow the maternal vacancy which will be supplied by Peggotty and Betsey Trotwood. (Cain 2008: 14-15)

Interestingly, in Dickens's text the motif of nests is modified by the dynamic function of "swinging", "like wrecks upon a stormy sea" or "sailing" in the variant motif of "the rooks sailing round the towers". In the marine imagery of these metaphors the maternal aspect of the nest corresponds to Sigmund Freud's description of the "oceanic feeling" as a return to the feeling of infancy and longing for parental protection. The motif of the nest-as-bosom appears in the description of David's homecoming in the touching scene of meeting his mother: "she laid my head down on her bosom near the little creature that was nestling there, and put its hand on my lips" (2011: 125).

Dickens's frequent use of marine metaphors in his narratives suggests an extension of remote perspectives and in this sense indicates a possibility of belief in something beyond this life. As Robert Higbie observes:

One way Dickens shifts the ideal beyond reality is by equating it with the sea. The sea lies beyond this world, as belief lies beyond reason and our sense of reality, and as death lies beyond life. (1998: 81)

Throughout the novel David accepts death as he accepts true belief. Dickens draws a parallel between death and truth according to the Biblical lesson that in death we are all one before God. The death of those whom David loves, to begin with the death of his father, makes him believe that the ideal exists beyond this life, and is to be found somewhere "higher" than this world. To reflect this idea on the spatial level, Dickens underlines the position of the rooks' nests on high branches and thus metaphorically suggests their connection with the area of heaven.

6. Never-never-land

Dickens creates the world of David's childhood by repetitively using the imagery of loss or expressions of loss as never being. An interesting connection with folklore is noted by Cain:

Ancient folklore [...] underscored the connection between the never-never-land of lost childhood, which the vogue for fairyland registered, and the afterlife. Fairyland was a theatrical, gas-lit vision of heaven inhabited by fancifully-clad angels, who like the classical putti were spirits of the dead. It was the place where children never grew up. (Cain 2008: 114)

The folkloristic motif of never-never land in Dickens's text can be semiotically defined as a dream-like state and the land of David's childhood. Mildred Newcomb emphasizes "the recurrent presence of dreams, dreaming, and dream-like states in Dickens's works" (1989: xvii). The motif of dream seems to imply that this imagined ideal of childhood land is vulnerable and can be destroyed just as a child's belief in the ideal can be shattered. In his narrative David self-consciously defines life as being "like a great fairy story" which he "was just about to begin to read" (2011: 297). The motif of recapturing the childhood world in connection with elements of fairyland appears in David's words:

I sat looking at Peggotty for some time, in a reverie on this suppositious case: whether, if she were employed to lose me like the boy in fairy tale, I should be able to track my way home again by the buttons she would shed. (Dickens 2011: 38)

The boy's loss of home and his hope of finding the way back suggests a retreat from reality to imagination in the sense of trying to find the ideal home (from the time before the arrival of the Murdstones).

Affected by his childish love, David figures the nest-home of his imaginative marriage with Em'ly as a grave constructed by birds – a variant of Blunderstone's deserted rookery. Spatial polarization of these images is based on their relation to down and up directions. As David says:

What happiness (I thought) if we were married, and were going away anywhere to live among the trees and in the fields, never growing older, never growing wiser, children ever, rambling hand in hand through sunshine and among flowery meadows, laying down our heads on moss at night, in a sweet sleep of purity and peace, and buried by the birds when we were dead! (Dickens 2011: 166)

In David's idyllic vision of happiness with Em'ly, heaven may be also seen in terms of a nest. Birds are expected to bury the children "when [they] are dead" and thus construct their grave as a kind of nest. Because birds – with their ability to fly up – can also be seen as connected with heaven, the implied eternal home may be construed as heavenly nest. Such an image links heaven to the idea of family home. This was reflected in popular devotional literature since the 1830s. The most characteristic Victorian idea of heaven defines it as a place where family reunions and the recognition of friends take place, and where lovers are united (Colledge 2012: 17). Writing to his children in *The Life of Our Lord*, Dickens remarks:

what a good place Heaven is [...] where we hope to go, and all to meet each other after we are dead, and there be happy always together. (Dickens 1934: 11)

The image of moss in connection with sleep introduces the horizontal aspect and down direction which, together with the motif of night, suggest death in the earthy sense. The motif of birds – through their association with flight – introduces the vertical movement up and may imply rising up from the grave.

The desire of remaining “children ever” which culminates in the motif of death and burial paradoxically points to the idea of the death of childhood or rather burial of childhood. In relation to David the motif of buried childhood appears very clearly in his words relating to the mother’s funeral. David admits that his childhood self is buried:

The mother who lay in the grave, was the mother of my infancy; the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed for ever on her bosom. (Dickens 2011: 151)

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the repeated return to childhood in Dickens’s artistic world expresses constant longing for childhood but signifies not only a return to the past but to death. Death is regularly identified with nostalgic returns. Dickens sentimentalizes death scenes and creates the background for symbolic rebirth. After adoption of David by aunt Betsey, he is “reborn” as Trotwood Copperfield. Betsey Trotwood’s reappearance in the plot marks a shift from the childhood trauma to a fairy-tale respite. The motif of rebirth after the death of childhood in Dickens’s novel brings it close to myth. However, in *David Copperfield* Dickens as a Christian never fails to draw an absolutely clear distinction between what is human and what is divine.

To sum up, the association of childhood with death concerns not only David’s early trauma of loss on the plot level, but also numerous metaphors constructed through language expressions as well as through imagery and motifs. Moreover, the key phrase “children ever” in the passage quoted above can be considered as Dickens’s reference to the Biblical idea of our Father in Heaven. The author seems to indicate that childhood defines the heavenly home (or nest) where we go – in the sense of homecoming – after death.

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