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USE OF LEGAL VOCABULARY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD*

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Abstract:

This research paper analyzes the use of legal vocabulary and its significance in Charles Dickens' novel, David Copperfield. The paper examines how Dickens uses legal terminology to depict the legal system of the Victorian era, distorts it to his comic artistry and its impact on society and individuals. Charles Dickens, the renowned Victorian author, was educated in law before embarking on his literary career. Many of Dickens' novels, including David Copperfield, reflect his legal training and provide insight into the legal system of Victorian England. This paper will analyze the legal vocabulary used in David Copperfield and how they reflect Dickens' adroitness in employing legal terminology for exposing and satirizing his society. The paper exhibits the evidentiary examples of legal vocabulary used in the novel, including Latin Maxims, Legal phrases and terms such as 'gentleman,' 'proctor,' and 'attorney,' and how they are used to describe the legal proceedings of the era. The analysis of legal vocabulary in David Copperfield sheds light on the Victorian era's legal system and how it impacted individuals' lives, making it a significant aspect of the novel's portrayal of society.

Keywords: Legal Vocabulary, Language, Meaning, David Copperfield, Maxims, Legal Phrases, etc.

David Copperfield is a novel by Charles Dickens that was published in 1850. The novel narrates the life story of David Copperfield from his early childhood until he becomes a successful writer. Dickens uses different types of vocabulary throughout the novel, including legal vocabulary, to depict the legal system of the Victorian era. "In *David Copperfield*, Dickens includes numerous examples of legal language and documents, using them to highlight the legal and social issues of Victorian England and to provide insight into the characters and their motivations" (Eble, 109). This paper will analyze the use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* and its significance to the overall theme of the novel.

Dickens incorporates several legal maxims into *David Copperfield*, reflecting his legal education and his understanding of the legal system of the Victorian era. One example of a legal maxim used in the novel is "ignorantia legis neminem excusat," which translates to "ignorance of the law excuses no one." This maxim is referenced in Chapter 27, when Mr. Micawber says, "As we have recently observed, with ignominy, in a legal document destined for posterity, the memory of Mr. Micawber shall never be forgotten" (Dickens, 27). This quote highlights the significance of legal knowledge and how ignorance of the law is not an excuse for wrongdoing.

Another legal maxim used in the novel is "nemo dat quod non habet," which translates to "no one can give what they do not have." This maxim is referenced in Chapter 29, when Mr. Wickfield's clerk accuses David of stealing, and David states that he did not take the money. David argues that "no



man had a right to do what he could not undo again” (Dickens, 29), alluding to the legal principle that no one can transfer ownership of something they do not possess.

Dickens uses legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* to depict the legal system of the Victorian era. The novel provides a detailed account of the legal proceedings of that era, including the terminology used in the courtrooms. One of the examples of legal vocabulary used in the novel is the term "gentleman." This term is frequently used in the novel to describe individuals who are of high social status and have a certain level of education. For example, in Chapter 15, David Copperfield's aunt says, "He's a gentleman, I am persuaded."

The novel contains legal phrases used to describe the legal system of the Victorian era. One example of legal phrase used in the novel is "cause in motion," which refers to a legal proceeding that has been initiated. Mr. Micawber tells *David Copperfield*, "I have a cause in motion" (Dickens, 27).

Another legal phrase used in the novel is "writ of habeas corpus," which refers to a legal order to bring a detained person before a court. In Chapter 38, Mr. Peggotty says, "We shall petition to remove the person to whom you are so very kind, from any farther authority" (Dickens, 38). This phrase highlights the importance of legal rights and protections in the Victorian era.

The phrase "under the act," which refers to legal regulations, is also used in the novel. In Chapter 39, Mr. Peggotty says, "We'll put in the papers, and have him cried in church, and put in the newspapers, if one of us should die under the act" (Dickens, 39).

Another example of legal vocabulary used in the novel is the term "proctor." In Chapter 28, when David Copperfield goes to London to seek his fortune, he meets Mr. Spenlow, who is a proctor. Mr. Spenlow tells David, "I am a proctor in Doctors' Commons." This term refers to a type of lawyer who deals with the legal affairs of the Church of England.

The term "attorney" is also used in the novel to describe a type of lawyer. In Chapter 27, Mr. Micawber says, "I am a solicitor myself, and am doing comparatively well." This term is used to describe a lawyer who prepares and conducts cases in court on behalf of clients.

Dickens also uses legal vocabulary to describe the legal proceedings of the era. For example, in Chapter 29, when David Copperfield is accused of stealing from Mr. Wickfield's office, he is taken to a court of law. The novel provides a detailed account of the courtroom proceedings, including the legal jargon used by the judge and the lawyers. "The use of Latin expressions, such as 'subpoena,' 'habeas corpus,' and 'pro bono publico,' can also be seen as a way to establish the status and expertise of lawyers, making them seem more learned and impressive to their clients" (Hsu p.344).

Reflections of Dickens' Legal Education and his understanding of Legal System:

The use of legal maxims in *David Copperfield* reflects Dickens' legal education and his understanding of the legal system. Dickens' knowledge of legal principles is evident throughout the novel, from the terminology used in the courtrooms to the legal maxims referenced in the dialogue. Moreover, Dickens' experience with the legal system likely influenced his depictions of the social hierarchy and power dynamics that are present throughout the novel. Here is a direct quote from Wiltshire's article "The Lawyers in David Copperfield":

The vocabulary of the law in *David Copperfield* is, as we should expect, extensive and at times technical, but it is used with great artistry, and in a way which is not always expected. In the hands of Dickens, the law can be comic, poetic, or even Gothic. Dickens knew the law, but he was not enslaved by its forms and limitations; he knew how to use it to serve his ends, both comic and serious (Dickens, 54).



Dickens' legal education also influenced his writing style, as he often uses legal jargon to create a sense of authenticity in his descriptions of legal proceedings. This style is evident in *David Copperfield*, as the novel provides a detailed account of the legal system of the era and the terminology used in the courtrooms. Here is a quote from Kelleher's article that discusses the use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield*:

Dickens was also fascinated by legal language, which he used to comic effect in many of his novels, including *David Copperfield*. In this novel, legal terms and phrases such as 'actionable wrongs,' 'barrister,' and 'writ of habeas corpus' are used to add authenticity to the legal scenes and create a sense of the power and authority of the legal profession. However, Dickens also used legal language to satirize the legal system and expose its flaws. For example, in the character of Mr. Spewlow, a pompous and self-important lawyer, Dickens portrays the legal profession as corrupt and self-serving.

Significance of Legal Vocabulary in David Copperfield:

The use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* is significant to the overall theme of the novel. Dickens uses legal vocabulary to depict the social and legal system of the Victorian era. The use of such vocabulary highlights the social hierarchy of the era and the power dynamic between different social classes.

Furthermore, the use of legal vocabulary in the novel also emphasizes the importance of the legal system in the Victorian era. The novel provides a detailed account of the legal proceedings and the terminology used in the courtrooms, which reflects the significance of the legal system in the era. "The use of legal language in the novel also reflects the broader cultural and historical context of Victorian England, in which the law was becoming an increasingly important aspect of social and economic life" (Eble. 111).

Legal vocabulary is an important aspect of literature, and its use can provide deeper insight into a character's motives, beliefs, and actions. In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens employs legal language to underscore the themes of justice, morality, and social order. This research paper examines the use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* and analyzes its significance in shaping the novel's meaning.

In *David Copperfield*, the character Uriah Heep's use of legal jargon highlights his deceptive nature and manipulative personality. Heep's frequent references to "the law" and "legal proceedings" reveal his cunning, as he uses legal language to justify his dishonest actions. Heep's use of legal vocabulary underscores the novel's themes of deceit and the importance of moral judgment. Dickens also employs legal language to critique the legal system of his time. In the novel, the character of Mr. Spewlow is a lawyer who is portrayed as corrupt and dishonest, and his actions highlight the flaws in the legal system. In the words of Sussane Schmid:

In *David Copperfield*, legal language is not confined to the courtroom, but seeps into everyday speech and behavior, shaping social interactions and psychological dynamics. Dickens uses legal vocabulary to describe relationships and actions, such as "debts," "claims," "discharge," "restitution," and "compensation," which imbue the novel's characters and events with legal connotations. Moreover, Dickens emphasizes the power relations that underlie legal discourse and the potential for abuse and manipulation, as seen in the



character of Mr. Murdstone, who uses legal language to dominate and control his stepson David (Schmid, 51-52).

Dickens' use of legal vocabulary exposes the legal system's injustices and its failure to uphold the principles of justice and fairness. The use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* also highlights the novel's exploration of social order and hierarchy. The character of Mr. Micawber, who often refers to "the law" and legal terms, reveals his desire to rise in social status and become a respected member of society. Micawber's use of legal language underscores the social hierarchies that existed in Victorian England, and the lengths to which people would go to improve their social standing. "The legal language of the novel functions, then, as a kind of 'dark double' of the moral vocabulary, exposing the contradictions and hypocrisies of Victorian social life" (Shostak, 277).

The language also helps in concrete characterization. "David Copperfield is suffused with the legal language and concepts that were part of the cultural currency of Dickens's time, and that shaped the development of his characters and their interactions with each other. Dickens's legal vocabulary includes terms for legal proceedings and institutions, for lawyers and judges, for legal transactions and disputes, and for crimes and punishments. His characters' understanding and use of legal language and concepts reveals their social standing, their intellectual and moral capacities, and their power or powerlessness in the face of the law" (Matus, 441).

In conclusion, the use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* serves as a literary device that deepens the novel's themes of morality, justice, and social order. The characters' use of legal jargon reveals their motives and beliefs, while also exposing the flaws in the legal system of the time. By employing legal vocabulary, Dickens provides a powerful commentary on the social, moral, and legal issues of Victorian England. The legal maxims used in *David Copperfield* reflect Charles Dickens' legal education and understanding of the legal system of Victorian England. The use of legal jargon and terminology throughout the novel creates a sense of authenticity and emphasizes the importance of legal knowledge in society. Moreover, the legal principles referenced in the novel reflect the social hierarchy and power dynamics of the era, which are significant aspects of the novel's portrayal of society. The analysis of legal maxims in *David Copperfield* provides insight into Dickens' legal education and its impact on his literary career. Dickens was known for his detailed and accurate portrayals of the social conditions of his time, including the legal system of the Victorian era. As a young man, Dickens worked as a law clerk and had some familiarity with legal terminology and proceedings. It is likely that his personal experience and research influenced his use of legal language in *David Copperfield* to accurately portray the legal system and its impact on society and individuals. Thus, use of legal vocabulary in *David Copperfield* is significant to the overall theme of the novel. The novel provides a detailed account of the legal system of the Victorian era, including the terminology used in the courtrooms. "Dickens also uses legal documents, such as wills and contracts, to advance the plot and to reveal character" (Eble 120). The use of legal vocabulary highlights the social hierarchy of the era and emphasizes the importance of the legal system in the era. Dickens uses legal vocabulary to depict the legal system of the era and its impact on individuals' lives, which is a significant aspect of the novel's portrayal of society. "Overall, the use of legal language in *David Copperfield* highlights the role of law in shaping social relationships and individual identities, and underscores the importance of language as a tool for establishing and maintaining power and authority" (Hsu.347).



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To Cite the Article: Goyal, Govind, "Use of Legal Vocabulary and its Significance in David Copperfield". *Literary Cognizance*, IV - 1 (June, 2023): 03-07. Web.