

David Copperfield

Written by : Charles Dickens

Published : 1850

A Glance on the Plot

- The novel traces the life of David Copperfield from the time of his birth to his mature manhood, when he is married and familiar with the vicissitudes of life. His early years are enjoyable with his mother — who was widowed shortly before his birth — and with her servant, Peggotty.
- Life is happy for David until his mother decides to marry Mr. Murdstone who brings his strict sister, Miss Murdstone, into the house. The Murdstones treat David cruelly, and David bites Mr. Murdstone's hand during one beating.
- Peggotty takes David to visit her family in Yarmouth, where David meets Peggotty's brother, Mr. Peggotty, and his two adopted children, Ham and Little Em'ly. Mr. Peggotty's family lives in a boat turned upside down—a space they share with Mrs. Gummidge, the widowed wife of Mr. Peggotty's brother.
- After this visit, David attends school at Salem House, which is run by a man named Mr. Creakle. David befriends and idolizes an egotistical young man named James Steerforth. David also befriends Tommy Traddles, an unfortunate, fat young boy who is beaten more than the others.
- When David's mother dies, he is taken from school and put to work by Mr. Murdstone in a London warehouse. Although David enjoys the company of the bankrupt Micawber family, with whom he boards, his other associates

and the work are intolerable, so, without money or property, he runs away to his Aunt Betsey Trotwood in Dover.

- Despite a stern exterior, Aunt Betsey treats him well, adopting him and sending him to a good school to a school run by a man named Doctor Strong. While at school, he boards with a Mr. Wickfield and his daughter Agnes. (Throughout the novel, David retains a fond, sisterly affection for Agnes.)
- Among Wickfield's boarders is Uriah Heep, a snakelike young man who often involves himself in matters that are none of his business. David graduates and goes to Yarmouth to visit Peggotty, who is now married to Mr. Barkis, the carrier.
- About this time, Em'ly, the Peggottys' beloved niece, runs off to marry Steerforth, whom David had innocently introduced to her while she was engaged to Ham, a nephew of the Peggottys. The family is saddened by this development, but Mr. Peggotty sets out to find her and bring her back.
- David reflects on what profession he should pursue. David uses his spare time doing clerical and literary work to help Aunt Betsey, who now finds herself without financial resources. At his aunt's suggestion, David works in the law office of Spenlow & Jorkins and soon falls in love with Mr. Spenlow's daughter, Dora. He marries Dora, only to find that he has a "child-wife" who knows nothing of housekeeping and cannot accept any responsibility.
- Meanwhile, Uriah Heep, an "umble" clerk in Mr. Wickfield's employ, whom David dislikes, has deceitfully worked his way into a partnership, aided by Mr. Wickfield's weakness for wine. In addition, David also discovers that his old friend Mr. Micawber has gone to work for Heep.

- David has remained fond of the Micawbers, and it troubles him that his old friend is working for a scoundrel. Eventually, however, Micawber has a grand moment of glory when he exposes Heep as a fraud, helping to save Mr. Wickfield and restoring some of Aunt Betsey's finances.
- David's wife, Dora, becomes ill and dies, and David is troubled until Em'ly, the Peggottys' niece, returns to her uncle. David has felt guilty for some time for having introduced Em'ly to Steerforth. After reconciliation is accomplished, Em'ly, along with some of the Peggottys, and the Micawbers leave for Australia to begin new lives.
- Before they leave, David witnesses a dramatic shipwreck in which Steerforth is killed, as is Ham in attempting to rescue him. Still saddened by the loss of his wife and other events, David goes abroad for three years. It is only after he returns that he realizes that Agnes Wickfield has been his true love all along, and their happy marriage take place at last.

Major Characters in the Novel

David Copperfield - The protagonist and narrator of the novel

Clara Copperfield - David's mother

Mr. Edward Murdstone And Miss Jane Murdstone - The cruel second husband of David's mother, and Murdstone's sister

Mr. Peggotty, Ham, And Mrs. Gummidge - The simple relatives of David's nurse, Clara Peggotty. Mr. Peggotty, Ham, and Mrs. Gummidge represent the virtues of simple people

Little Em'ly - Peggotty's unfaithful niece, who is sweet but also coy and vain

Mr. And Mrs. Wilkins Micawber - An unlucky couple crippled by constantly precarious finances

Clara Peggotty - David's nanny and caretaker

Miss Betsey Trotwood - David's eccentric, kind-hearted aunt

Doctor Strong And Annie Strong - A man and woman who exemplify the best of married life

Tommy Traddles - Young David's simple, goodhearted schoolmate.

James Steerforth - A condescending, self-centered villain with whom Em'ly elopes despite being engaged to Ham

Agnes Wickfield - David's true love and second wife, the daughter of Mr. Wickfield

Uriah Heep - A two-faced, conniving villain who puts on a false show of humility and meekness to disguise his evil intentions

Dora Spenlow - David's first wife and first real love. Dora is foolish and giddy

Mrs. Steerforth And Rosa Dartle - Steerforth's mother and her ward, the orphan child of her husband's cousin

Major Themes

The Plight of the Weak

Throughout *David Copperfield*, the powerful abuse the weak and helpless. Dickens focuses on orphans, women, and the mentally disabled to show that exploitation—not pity or compassion—is the rule in an industrial society. David starves and suffers in a wine-bottling factory as a child. As his guardian, Mr. Murdstone can exploit David as factory labor because the boy is too small and dependent on him

to disobey. Likewise, the boys at Salem House have no recourse against the cruel Mr. Creakle. In both situations, children deprived of the care of their natural parents suffer at the hands of their own supposed protectors.

The weak in *David Copperfield* never escape the domination of the powerful by challenging the powerful directly. Instead, the weak must ally themselves with equally powerful characters. David, for example, doesn't stand up to Mr. Murdstone and challenge his authority. Instead, he flees to the wealthy Miss Betsey, whose financial stability affords her the power to shelter David from Mr. Murdstone.

Equality in Marriage

In the world of the novel, marriages succeed to the extent that husband and wife attain equality in their relationship. Dickens holds up the Strongs' marriage as an example to show that marriages can only be happy if neither of the two is subjugated to the other. On the other hand, Mr. Murdstone forces Clara into submission in the name of improving her, which leaves her meek and voiceless.

Wealth and Class

Throughout the novel, Dickens criticizes the society's view of wealth and class as measures of a person's value. Dickens uses Steerforth, who is wealthy, powerful, and noble, to show that these traits are more likely to corrupt than improve a person's character. Steerforth is treacherous and self-absorbed. On the other hand, Mr. Peggotty and Ham, both poor, are generous, sympathetic characters.

Web Sources- 1. <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/copperfield/>

2- <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/d/david-copperfield/book-summary>