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Opening extract from

David Copperfield

Written by

Charles Dickens

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Published by

Real Reads

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Published by Real Reads Ltd
Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK
www.realreads.co.uk

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First published in 2007

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ISBN 978-1-906230-03-6

Printed in China by Imago Ltd
Designed by Lucy Guenot
Typeset by Bookcraft Limited, Stroud, Gloucestershire

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THE CHARACTERS



David Copperfield

David's childhood is shattered when his mother remarries. Is he strong enough to find happiness in spite of the difficulties he faces?

Peggotty

A loyal servant and friend to David's mother. For how long will she be able to help David?





Aunt Betsey Trotwood

David's intimidating aunt. Will she ever accept him as her nephew?

Mr Murdstone

David's cruel stepfather. Will he destroy David and his mother?





Steerforth

David's admired schoolfriend. Does he deserve David's trust?

Uriah Heep

Uriah is snake-like in his appearance, but does this mean that David is right to distrust him?





Agnes

Agnes is like a sister to David, who relies upon her support and friendship. Is David being blind?



DAVID COPPERFIELD

That Friday night the storm raged and the wind howled. Rain scratched against the windows, trying desperately to get in. As the clock struck midnight, David's mother cried out with pain. Tiny, pink and naked, David Copperfield was delivered into the world.

As his exhausted mother held him tenderly, he was unaware that the day and time of his birth were bad omens. He was unaware that his father was already dead. He was unaware of the misfortunes and difficulties that lay ahead.

A shrill voice called up the stairs from the parlour, where his Aunt Betsey eagerly awaited the birth of the child, confident that it would be a girl. 'Is she born yet? Come, come, Peggotty, don't dawdle.'

Peggotty, her plump, apple-like cheeks a brighter red than usual, came flustering and



blustering into the parlour from her mistress's room, excited to deliver the news. 'It's a boy!' she gasped. Her bosom swelled with such joy and pride that two buttons popped from her bodice and flew across the room.

Betsey Trotwood silently raised herself from her chair and slowly stooped to pick up her hat. In one fast blast she whacked Peggotty with it. Without a word she marched straight out into the storm, and out of all their lives.



In spite of the ill omens of his birth, the first four years of David's life were happy ones. Loved and guided by his gentle mother and their hard-working servant Peggotty, he grew up honest and trusting, little suspecting how quickly things can change.

Change came one day, in the form of a firm handshake.

'That's the wrong hand, boy.' David looked up. In the face that looked down at him the mouth was smiling, but the cold dark eyes were not. David timidly offered his other hand, and the gentleman grasped it firmly – too firmly for David's comfort.



‘Davey, this is Mr Murdstone,’ whispered his mother. Jet black hair framed the man’s heavy dark face. Standing tall above David, Mr Murdstone blocked out the sun, creating a small patch of shade in which David shivered.

‘Pleased to meet you, sir,’ he said politely.

‘Master Davey,’ whispered Peggotty, shaking her head sadly, ‘this is your new pa.’

That one simple sentence heralded the end of David’s life as he had known it.



Murdstone was a firm believer that children had to be handled with firmness, and kept a safe distance from their parents.

‘Be firm, Clara,’ he told David’s mother whenever she showed any desire to embrace, kiss or laugh with her son. ‘Be firm, my dear,’ he said when she tried to comfort David in his new loneliness.

David’s mother begged Murdstone not to beat her son, and cried when David was dragged, terrified, from the room. Peggotty followed, trying in vain to pull Murdstone back.

‘Oh, pray don’t beat me, sir!’ cried David. ‘I do try to be good! I only wanted to talk to my mother. Oh please!’

David felt that the beating would never end. He was torn and bleeding, his face red

Sitting with his good angel clasped in his arms, David looked back on his life. He remembered boyhood happiness curtailed; a short, precious time with his mother and brother; friends both dear and false. He saw an image of a boy, penniless, battered and bruised, finally arriving in Dover, carrying in his breast a heart that would one day belong entirely to Agnes.



TAKING THINGS FURTHER

The real read

This *Real Reads* version of *David Copperfield* is a retelling of Charles Dickens' magnificent work. If you would like to read the full novel in all its original splendour, many complete editions are available, from bargain paperbacks to beautifully-bound hardbacks. You may well find a copy in your local charity shop.

Filling in the spaces

The loss of so many of Charles Dickens' original words is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process. We have had to make some difficult decisions, omitting subplots and details, some important, some less so, but all interesting. We have also, at times, taken the liberty of combining two events into one, or of giving a character words or actions that originally belong to another. The points below will fill in some of the gaps, but nothing can beat the original.

- Mr Murdstone has a sister, Miss Murdstone, who helps him to make David's life unbearable. His easily-influenced mother follows their heartless guidance in her treatment of David.

- Peggotty marries a colourful character called Barkis, who dies towards the end of the novel.

- At Salem House, David makes another friend called Tommy Traddles. Good-natured Traddles is the victim of bullying by both the boys and the teachers. He returns later in the novel and plays an important role in the plot. He is always admirable and honest.

- Dickens introduces readers to the mothers of both Uriah Heep and Steerforth. Neither is a good example of parenting.

- Little Em'ly and Ham are engaged to be married when Emily elopes with Steerforth.

- When Ham drowns trying to save the man from a sinking ship, nobody knows that the

man is Steerforth, whose body is eventually washed up on the shore. David doesn't tell Mr Peggotty and Emily about Ham's death.

- Aunt Betsey's constant companion is Mr Dick. Most people consider him mad, but she relies upon his judgement and he is a good friend to David.

- Dr Strong and his wife, Annie, are also victims of Uriah's scheming, but their happiness is eventually restored by Mr Dick.

- The family David lives with in London is called Micawber. Mr and Mrs Micawber are wonderful characters, always struggling with debt but always optimistic and loyal.

- Dora is a delightful girl, and everybody is fond of her. While David is still with Dora, Agnes and Dora become friends. Aunt Betsey calls her 'Little Blossom'.

- Dora marries David in spite of his poverty. She asks him to call her his 'child-wife'. Their love is real, but David becomes aware of

limitations to their relationship. Dora dies an early death, telling Agnes that she wants her to be David's next wife.

Back in time

David Copperfield is Dickens' most autobiographical novel. When Dickens was twelve years old, his father was sent to a debtor's prison. The young Charles had to work in a warehouse to earn money for the family. David's career follows the same pattern as Dickens' – law clerk, journalist, novelist.

Victorian England was in a period of great transition. Having been an agricultural, rural economy, it was moving swiftly towards industrial nationhood. A 'middle class' was emerging, with considerable economic and political influence. However, the divide between the rich and the poor was quickly widening. Dickens shows the weak position of poor people. David Copperfield is only saved and allowed an education because Aunt Betsey is wealthy.

The majority of Victorian children did not receive a formal education. It was not until 1891 that they were entitled to free state education. Through the difference between Salem School and Mr Strong's school, Dickens shows that cruelty and parrot-fashion learning are ineffective compared with education that enables students to develop their imaginations and morals in a caring environment.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Charles Dickens' and David Copperfield's England:

Books

- Terry Deary, *Loathsome London* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 2005.
- Terry Deary, *Vile Victorians* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 1994.

- *Victorian London,* Watling Street Publishing, 2005.
- Ann Kramer, *Victorians* (Eyewitness Guides), Dorling Kindersley, 1998.
- John Malam and David Antram, *You Wouldn't Want To Be a Victorian Schoolchild: Lessons You'd Rather Not Learn,* Hodder, 2002.
- Mandy Ross, *Victorian Schools* (Life in the Past), Heinemann, 2005.
- Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens,* BBC, 2003.

Websites

- www.victorianweb.org

Scholarly information on all aspects of Victorian life, including literature, history and culture.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians

The BBC's interactive site about Victorian Britain, with a wide range of information and activities for all ages.

- www.dickensmuseum.com

Home of the Dickens Museum in London, with details about exhibits and events.

- www.dickensworld.co.uk

Dickens World, based in Chatham in Kent, is a themed visitor complex featuring the life, books and times of Charles Dickens.

- www.charlesdickenspage.com

A labour of love dedicated to Dickens, with information about his life and his novels. Many useful links.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain

A site offering source materials and guidance in how to use them, as well as a wealth of information.

Food for thought

Here are some things to think about if you are reading *David Copperfield* alone, or ideas for discussion if you are reading it with friends.

In retelling *David Copperfield* we have tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, Dickens' original plot and characters. We have also tried to imitate aspects of his style. Remember, however, that this is not the

original work; thinking about the points below, therefore, can help you begin to understand Charles Dickens' craft. To move forward from here, turn to the full-length version of *David Copperfield* and lose yourself in his wonderful storytelling.

Starting points

- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- How surprised were you when Steerforth betrayed David's trust?
- How does the reader know that David should not trust Uriah Heep?
- What qualities can you find in the characters of David and Aunt Betsey?
- Compare David's attraction towards Dora with his love for Agnes.

Themes

What do you think Charles Dickens is saying about the following themes in *David Copperfield*?

- families
- education
- poverty and wealth
- trust and betrayal
- love

Style

Can you find paragraphs containing examples of the following?

- descriptions of setting and atmosphere
- repetition of sounds (assonance and alliteration) to create rhythm and enhance description
- the use of imagery to enhance description
- the use of humour

Look closely at how these paragraphs are written. What do you notice? Can you write a paragraph in the same style?

Symbols

Writers frequently use symbols in their work to deepen the reader's emotions and understanding. Charles Dickens is no exception. Think about how the symbols in this list match the action in *David Copperfield*.

- the sea
- angels
- light and shadow

