



David Copperfield

(1850)

PLOT AND SETTING

Born a 'posthumous child' to an immature and ineffectual mother, Clara Copperfield, David starts life in a state of happiness with his mother and his nurse, Peggotty. This condition is destroyed by the arrival of his cruel stepfather, Mr Murdstone, and his sister Jane. Eventually they cause Clara's early death with their terrible 'firmness'. David is then sent away to Salem House, a school far from home; here he is tormented and brutalised by Mr Creakle, the harsh, cruel headmaster. After his mother's death, he is consigned to Murdstone and Grinby's wine warehouse (→ Text Bank 51) in London, where he works experiencing poverty, despair and loneliness. He lives with the family of Mr Micawber, whose continual financial difficulties lead to his eventual imprisonment for debt.

Running away from this fate, David decides to go to his aunt Betsey in Dover. In spite of her eccentricity, she helps him grow up and dismisses the Murdstones from their responsibility for him. David concludes his education and looks for a career in London, where he starts to work at first as Doctor Strong's secretary and then as a parliamentary reporter. Later he becomes a successful writer, but he makes a disastrous marriage with Dora Spenlow, loses his inheritance from Aunt Betsey and is betrayed by his closest friend.

It is only at the very end of the novel, after his first wife's death and his own symbolic death and rebirth, that he marries his predestined love, Agnes Wickfield, and lives happily ever after.

STRUCTURE

David Copperfield is David's narration in his maturity of the events and incidents through which he remembers his life. The protagonist's recollections can be divided into three main parts:

Part one: his childhood and early youth, starting with his birth in Blunderstone and ending when he completes his time at Strong's school in Canterbury (chapters 1-18);

Part two: his later youth and early manhood, from his looking for a career to the death of his first wife, Dora (chapters 19-53);

Part three: his maturity, starting from his mourning for Dora and ending with his marriage to Agnes Wickfield and his happy life afterwards (chapters 54-64).

CHARACTERS

The characters of the novel are both realistic and romantic; they are exaggerated, like all of Dickens's figures, and characterised by a particular psychological trait, which can

be a peculiar way of speaking, of moving and behaving (→ Text Bank 51).

IS DAVID A HERO?

The first five paragraphs of the book raise a central question which is whether we are to regard David as the hero of the novel. The answer is both yes and no. David is not a hero in the ordinary sense of the term, since he is not an example of integrity who either by brave actions or spiritual strength defeats the forces of evil. In fact, his lack of discipline, romanticism and self-deception lead him to disaster. However, he can be called a hero because he learns, through experience and suffering, how to improve his character and his circumstances.

THEMES

The first chapters of *David Copperfield* introduce the main themes of the whole novel:

- **the struggles of the weak in society:** David is an orphan and a victim, he stands for the uncertainty, the loneliness and the terrible evanescence which characterised the life of those people who were not helped by a cruel, competitive society;
- the great importance given by the respectable Victorians to **strict education** based on hard work and physical punishment;
- **cruelty to children** who were **exploited by adults**;
- the bad living conditions of the poor who lived in slums;
- the importance of social status: after a hard childhood David succeeds in improving his social condition thanks to his determination and perseverance;
- friendship and love leading to marriage.

STYLE

David Copperfield is a *Bildungsroman*, that is, a novel that follows the development of the hero from childhood into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity.

The emotional identification of Dickens with David is very strong; trivial clues, like the use of his own initials in reverse, are interwoven into a more straightforward identification of careers. David, like Dickens, is a parliamentary reporter, who becomes a literary man. By speaking in the first person, the author enjoyed all the pleasures of sentimental reminiscence.

The protagonist of the novel functions also as narrator and the book is built as a **fictional autobiography**. David is never offstage: all the events and characters are revealed through his presence and consciousness.



Key idea	<p>The pervading atmosphere of the novel is a combination of realism and enchantment. There is an apparent realism in the people, places and events of the story, but those protagonists are also imbued with the magic of a fairy tale.</p> <p>The Murdstones enter the scene like ogres; they fade away like a nightmare. Even Betsey Trotwood is in the tradition of the fairy godmother, omnipotent, wilful and kind. She has no human need to conform to reality. All her prejudices are treated as admirable. Peggotty's brother's house belongs to a fairy tale and so does the account of the death of her husband, Barkis, who suddenly disappears.</p> <p>Uriah Heep the Wickfield's clerk, is a villain, a strange creature, repellent and sinister, unable to smile. Uriah hates David, because David is the embodiment of what he might have been; on the other hand, David's attraction to Uriah is the human attraction to evil. By distorting reality and fantasy, Dickens helps us grasp reality and sharpen our awareness and knowledge of the external world.</p> <p>Throughout the book, there is no real pressure of reality, no logic of cause and effect. David, employed in a wine warehouse, needs a kind relative, money and education. He finds them. David wishes to marry Dora against her father's consent; so Dora's father suddenly dies. Dora is the type of feather-brained beauty who is only tolerable when she is young, and David needs to escape to the safe arms of his good angel, Agnes. So Dora too dies. Difficulties and dangers disappear like mist and their main function seems to give that quickened sense of joy and relief which follows their miraculous removal.</p>	
Realism and enchantment		

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts and answer the questions about *David Copperfield*.

- 1 What events are told in this novel?
- 2 How many parts can be detected in *David Copperfield*?
- 3 Is David a hero?
- 4 What are the main themes?
- 5 What kind of novel is it?
- 6 Who narrates all the events?
- 7 What atmosphere characterises the whole novel?
- 8 Why is it possible to state that there is an apparent realism in the characters of the novel?
- 9 What are the main function of difficulties and dangers?



Shall I ever forget those lessons?

David's idyllic childhood is interrupted when Mr Murdstone begins to court Clara Copperfield. David happily goes with Peggotty to visit her family, but when he comes back home, Murdstone and his mother have married, and, not long after, Murdstone's strict sister Jane moves in.

- Shall I ever forget those lessons! They were presided over nominally by my mother, but really by Mr Murdstone and his sister, who were always present, and found them a favourable occasion for giving my mother lessons in that misalled¹ firmness, which was the bane² of both our lives. I believe I was kept at home for that purpose. I had
- 5 been apt³ enough to learn, and willing enough, when my mother and I had lived alone together. I can faintly remember learning the alphabet at her knee. To this day, when I look upon the fat black letters in the primer⁴, the puzzling novelty of their shapes, and the easy good-nature of O and Q and S, seem to present themselves again before me as they used to do. But they recall no feeling of disgust or reluctance. On the contrary, I
- 10 seem to have walked along a path of flowers as far as the crocodile-book, and to have been cheered by the gentleness of my mother's voice and manner all the way. But these solemn lessons which succeeded those, I remember as the death-blow⁵ of my peace,

Charles Dickens
David Copperfield
(1850)

Chapter IV

- 1 misalled. Chiamata impropriamente.
- 2 bane. Sventura.
- 3 apt. Sveglio.
- 4 primer. Sillabario.
- 5 death-blow. Colpo mortale.



and a grievous daily drudgery⁶ and misery. They were very long, very numerous, very hard – perfectly unintelligible⁷, some of them, to me – and I was generally as much bewildered by them as I believe my poor mother was herself.

Let me remember how it used to be, and bring one morning back again.

I come into the second-best parlour after breakfast, with my books, and an exercise-book, and a slate⁸. My mother is ready for me at her writing-desk, but not half so ready as Mr Murdstone in his easy-chair⁹ by the window (though he pretends to be reading a book), or as Miss Murdstone, sitting near my mother stringing steel beads¹⁰. The very sight of these two has such an influence over me, that I begin to feel the words I have been at infinite pains to get into my head, all sliding away¹¹, and going I don't know where. I wonder where they do go, by the by?

I hand the first book to my mother. Perhaps it is a grammar, perhaps a history, or geography. I take a last drowning look¹² at the page as I give it into her hand, and start off aloud at a racing pace¹³ while I have got it fresh. I trip over a word¹⁴. Mr Murdstone looks up. I trip over another word. Miss Murdstone looks up. I redden, tumble over¹⁵ half-a-dozen words, and stop. I think my mother would show me the book if she dared, but she does not dare, and she says softly:

'Oh, Davy, Davy!'

'Now, Clara,' says Mr Murdstone, 'be firm with the boy. Don't say, "Oh, Davy, Davy!" That's childish. He knows his lesson, or he does not know it.'

'He does NOT know it,' Miss Murdstone interposes awfully.

'I am really afraid he does not,' says my mother.

'Then, you see, Clara,' returns Miss Murdstone, 'you should just give him the book back, and make him know it.'

'Yes, certainly,' says my mother; 'that is what I intend to do, my dear Jane. Now, Davy, try once more, and don't be stupid.'

I obey the first clause of the injunction¹⁶ by trying once more, but am not so successful with the second, for I am very stupid. I tumble down before I get to the old place, at a point where I was all right before, and stop to think. But I can't think about the lesson. I think of the number of yards of net in Miss Murdstone's cap, or of the price of Mr Murdstone's dressing-gown, or any such ridiculous problem that I have no business with, and don't want to have anything at all to do with. Mr Murdstone makes a movement of impatience which I have been expecting for a long time. Miss Murdstone does the same. My mother glances submissively at them, shuts the book, and lays it by as an arrear¹⁷ to be worked out when my other tasks are done.

There is a pile of these arrears very soon, and it swells like a rolling snowball. The bigger it gets, the more stupid I get. The case is so hopeless, and I feel that I am wallowing¹⁸ in such a bog¹⁹ of nonsense, that I give up all idea of getting out, and abandon myself to my fate. The despairing way in which my mother and I look at each other, as I blunder on²⁰, is truly melancholy. But the greatest effect in these miserable lessons is when my mother (thinking nobody is observing her) tries to give me the cue²¹ by the motion of her lips. At that instant, Miss Murdstone, who has been lying in wait for nothing else all along, says in a deep warning voice:

'Clara!'

My mother starts, colours, and smiles faintly. Mr Murdstone comes out of his chair, takes the book, throws it at me or boxes my ears with it, and turns me out of the room by the shoulders.

6 grievous ... drudgery. Penosa fatica quotidiana.

7 unintelligible. Incomprensibili.

8 slate. Lavagnetta.

9 easy-chair. Poltrona.

10 stringing ... beads. Legando con lo spago perline d'acciaio.

11 sliding away. Scivolare via.

12 drowning look. Sguardo perso.

13 racing pace. Ritmo affrettato.

14 trip over a word. Inciampo su di una parola.

15 tumble over. Cado.

16 injunction. Ordine.

17 arrear. Arretrato.

18 am wallowing. Sto sguazzando.

19 bog. Pantano.

20 blunder on. Continuo a commettere errori.

21 cue. Suggestimento.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS****1 READ** the text and write a caption to describe the content of each section.

- Part 1 (lines):
- Part 2 (lines):
- Part 3 (lines):
- Part 4 (lines):

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents. Then answer the following questions.

I can

They



start off

.....



Which aspects of the character's personality are highlighted?



My mother

Which feelings characterise her world?

**3 DO** the following activities in pairs.

- 1 From whose point of view is the situation introduced?
- 2 What kind of narrator is used?
- 3 Dickens uses many techniques to 'tag' characters. One way is to give them names that sound like their qualities. The name 'Murdstone' is composed of two words. Can you find out their meaning? What do they suggest about the personality of Clara's husband?
- 4 Another technique used by Dickens to portray characters is to associate them with particular objects. What objects surround Miss Murdstone? What do they tell you about her personality?
- 5 What do the sight of Mr and Miss Murdstone cause in David? What do they represent to him?
- 6 What tenses are employed in the text? Where does a shift tense occur? What is the function of both tenses?
- 7 What is the main theme of the text?

4 REPORT what you have learnt about the features and meaning of the passage.**> COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

- 5 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph about the Victorian ambivalence about philanthropy and 'self-help'. Refer to the historical and social context (→ 5.1 and B2 Exams, p. 8) and to this text, where Dickens deliberately criticised the 'education' given to David by the Murdstones. In this and other novels he opened the debate on what schools should be like. Why had education become necessary, but was also considered dangerous?

> COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

- 6 DISCUSS.** Fear is not considered to be a good motive for learning in modern times. Is this true in your experience? Can fear be a useful teaching tool? Does it persuade you to learn? Consider sport, music and other leisure activities as well as school lessons.