



Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse

After the death of David's mother, the Murdstones oblige David to leave Blunderstone for London where the boy's stepfather owns a wine warehouse, Murdstone and Grinby. The poor boy starts a miserable and unhappy life.

Charles Dickens
David Copperfield
(1850)
Chapter XI

I know enough of the world now, to have almost lost the capacity of being much surprised by anything; but it is matter of some surprise to me, even now, that I can have been so easily thrown away at such an age. A child of excellent abilities, and with strong powers of observation, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt bodily or mentally, it seems wonderful to me that nobody should have made any sign in my behalf¹. But none was made; and I became, at ten years old, a little labouring hind² in the service of Murdstone and Grinby.

Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse was at the waterside. It was down in Blackfriars. Modern improvements have altered the place; but it was the last house at the bottom of a narrow street, curving downhill to the river, with some stairs at the end, where people took boat. It was a crazy old house with a wharf³ of its own, abutting⁴ on the water when the tide⁵ was in, and on the mud⁶ when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats. Its panelled rooms, discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say; its decaying floors and staircase; the squeaking⁷ and scuffling⁸ of the old grey rats down in the cellars; and the dirt and rottenness⁹ of the place; are things, not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant. They are all before me, just as they were in the evil hour when I went among them for the first time, with my trembling hand in Mr Quinion's.

Murdstone and Grinby's trade was among a good many kinds of people, but an important branch of it was the supply of wines and spirits to certain packet ships¹⁰. I forget now where they chiefly went, but I think there were some among them that made voyages both to the East and West Indies. I know that a great many empty bottles were one of the consequences of this traffic, and that certain men and boys were employed to examine them against the light, and reject those that were flawed¹¹, and to rinse and wash them. When the empty bottles ran short, there were labels to be pasted on full ones, or corks¹² to be fitted to them, or seals to be put upon the corks, or finished bottles to be packed in casks. All this work was my work, and of the boys employed upon it I was one.

There were three or four of us, counting me. My working place was established in a corner of the warehouse, where Mr Quinion could see me, when he chose to stand up on the bottom rail¹³ of his stool in the counting-house, and look at me through a window above the desk. Hither¹⁴, on the first morning of my so auspiciously beginning life on my own account, the oldest of the regular boys was summoned¹⁵ to show me my business. His name was Mick Walker, and he wore a ragged apron¹⁶ and a paper cap. He informed me that his father was a bargeman¹⁷, and walked, in a black velvet head dress¹⁸, in the Lord Mayor's Show. He also informed me that our principal associate would be another boy whom he introduced by the – to me – extraordinary name of Mealy Potatoes. I discovered, however, that this youth had not been christened by that name, but that it had been bestowed¹⁹ upon him in the warehouse, on account of his complexion, which was pale or mealy²⁰. Mealy's father was a waterman, who had the additional distinction of being a fireman, and was engaged as such at one of the large theatres; where some young relation of Mealy's – I think his little sister – did Imps²¹ in the Pantomimes.

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these henceforth everyday associates with those of my happier childhood – not to say with Steerforth, Traddles, and the rest of those boys; and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my bosom. The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now;

- 1 in my behalf. A mio favore.
- 2 labouring hind. Garzone.
- 3 wharf. Molo interno.
- 4 abutting. A ridosso.
- 5 tide. Marea.
- 6 mud. Fango.
- 7 squeaking. Squittire.
- 8 scuffling. Stropiccio.
- 9 rottenness. Imputridimento, marciume.
- 10 packet ships. Navi postali.
- 11 flawed. Crepate.
- 12 corks. Tappi.
- 13 rail. Sbarra.
- 14 Hither. Da qui.
- 15 was summoned. Fu chiamato.
- 16 ragged apron. Grembiule stracciato.
- 17 bargeman. Barcaiole.
- 18 velvet head dress. Copricapo di velluto.
- 19 bestowed. Conferito.
- 20 mealy. Pallido.
- 21 Imps. Folletti, diavoletti.



50 of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. As often as Mick Walker went away in the course of that forenoon, I mingled my tears with the water in which I was washing the bottles; and sobbed as if there were a **flaw** in my own breast, and it were in danger of bursting.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| 1 | rifornimento | 6 | d'ora in avanti |
| 2 | sigilli | 7 | si esaurivano, finivano |
| 3 | battezzato | 8 | magazzino |
| 4 | incollate | 9 | invaso da |
| 5 | difetto | | |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and decide which paragraphs make up the following parts of the story's structure.

- | | |
|---|---|
| • Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse and its trade; | • David's consciousness about his degrading work; |
| • David's new companions; | • David's anxiety and desperation. |

3 SUMMARISE each part of the story's structure in one or two sentences.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

4 FOCUS on the narrative technique.

- 1 Identify the type of narrator.
- 2 Define the point/s of view through which all the events are seen.
- 3 State the effect of this narrative technique on the readers.

5 IDENTIFY the predominant narrative mode.

6 FOCUS on the character of David Copperfield.

- 1 What is he like?
- 2 What is David's young age in antithesis to?
- 3 What causes the boy's desperation most?

7 CONSIDER the other two characters of the passage.

- 1 Put the words and phrases which describe them in the following table.

| | | |
|----------------|--|--|
| Name | | |
| Clothes | | |
| Family | | |



- 2 What does the name of the second boy suggest about his personality?
- 3 What is the narrator's attitude towards both of them?

8 COMPLETE the table below with words or expressions taken from the text used to describe Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse in the second paragraph.

| Hearing | Touch | Sight | Smell | Taste |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

- 1 Which sense is most appealed to?
- 2 What atmosphere does such a place convey?
- 3 What is this warehouse a symbol of?

9 FIND some examples of present tense and past tense in the text. Then state their function.

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

10 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph also referring to T59 and T62, summarising Dickens's attitude towards

- industrialisation;
- the exploitation of children.

➤ COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

11 DISCUSS. What feelings does the description of Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse arouse in you? Do you think the new forms of children's exploitation, like begging, prostitution and moonlighting have their cultural roots in the period of the Industrial Revolution?