

David Copperfield by Charles Dickens

Dr. Archana Singh

David Copperfield is a first-person autobiographical-style novel that follows the life of David Copperfield from birth to adulthood. It is considered one of Dickens's most personal works, containing many elements from his own childhood.

Early Childhood

David is born in Blunderstone, Suffolk, six months after his father's death. He lives happily with his gentle young mother Clara and their loving servant Clara Peggotty (called Peggotty). Peggotty takes David to Yarmouth to visit her brother Mr. Daniel Peggotty, who lives in an upturned boat with his adopted relatives: Ham (a strong, kind fisherman), Little Em'ly (a beautiful, innocent girl), and the complaining Mrs. Gummidge.

David's happy life ends when his mother marries the cold, cruel Mr. Edward Murdstone. Murdstone's tyrannical sister Miss Jane Murdstone moves in and controls the household. They suppress Clara's affection for David. When David bites Murdstone during a beating, he is sent to Salem House boarding school, run by the brutal headmaster Mr. Creakle. There David befriends cheerful Tommy Traddles and admires the charismatic but arrogant older boy James Steerforth.

Soon after, David's mother dies in childbirth (along with the baby). Peggotty is dismissed and marries the carrier Mr. Barkis ("Barkis is willin"). At age 10, David is taken out of school and sent to work as a child laborer in Murdstone and Grinby's wine-bottling warehouse in London, pasting labels on bottles. He lives in poverty and lodges with the endlessly optimistic but always-in-debt Mr. Wilkins Micawber and his large family.

Escape and New Beginning

Unable to endure the hardship, David runs away on foot to Dover to find his eccentric great-aunt Miss Betsey Trotwood. With the help of her simple-minded but kind lodger Mr. Dick, Betsey takes David in, rescues him from the Murdstones, and sends him to a good school in Canterbury run by the gentle Dr. Strong.

In Canterbury, David lives with the lawyer Mr. Wickfield and becomes close friends with his sweet, wise daughter Agnes Wickfield (whom he calls his "good angel"). He also meets the creepy, hypocritical clerk Uriah Heep, who constantly claims to be "umble" while secretly plotting to take over Wickfield's business.

Young Adulthood and First Love

David grows up, becomes a parliamentary shorthand reporter, and falls deeply in love with the pretty, childish, and impractical Dora Spenlow, daughter of his employer Mr. Spenlow. Despite warnings from Agnes, David marries Dora. Their marriage is affectionate but unhappy — Dora is incapable of managing a household and remains childlike.

Major Tragedies and Betrayals

Meanwhile, James Steerforth seduces and runs away with Little Em'ly, ruining her reputation and breaking the hearts of the Peggotty family. Mr. Daniel Peggotty searches for Em'ly across Europe.

Uriah Heep gradually manipulates and blackmails Mr. Wickfield into alcoholism and ruins his reputation, aiming to marry Agnes and take control of the business.

Turning Points and Resolution

Dora becomes seriously ill after a miscarriage and dies, leaving David heartbroken. He realizes too late that his true love was always Agnes, not Dora.

A terrible storm at Yarmouth claims the lives of both Steerforth (who drowns) and Ham (who dies trying to rescue him).

David travels abroad for three years to recover from grief. During this time he begins writing and becomes a successful novelist.

Back in England, Mr. Micawber bravely exposes Uriah Heep's fraud and forgeries. With evidence provided by Micawber, Heep is arrested, imprisoned, and ruined. Mr. Wickfield recovers, and his business is saved.

Happy Endings

David finally confesses his love to Agnes, and they marry. They live happily together and have several children.

Many characters find new beginnings:

Mr. Peggotty and Little Em'ly emigrate to Australia, where Em'ly finds peace and a new life.

The Micawbers also emigrate to Australia and prosper there.

Miss Betsey Trotwood, Mr. Dick, and others remain content.

The novel ends with David reflecting on his life, his growth through suffering, and his deep love for Agnes, emphasizing themes of resilience, moral development, and the triumph of goodness.

Key Points for Exams / Study Notes

Genre: Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel) + semi-autobiographical fiction

Publication: Serialized May 1849 – November 1850; published as a book in 1850

Main Themes:

Personal growth (“disciplining the undisciplined heart”)

Social injustice (child labor, class inequality, hypocrisy)

Love vs. infatuation (Dora vs. Agnes)

Redemption and second chances

Memory and reflection

Major Contrasts:

Dora (child-wife, romantic illusion) vs. Agnes (mature, wise partner)

Steerforth (charming but destructive) vs. Ham (simple, heroic)

Uriah Heep (false humility, ambition) vs. Mr. Micawber (genuine optimism)

Important Symbols:

The sea/storms = fate and tragedy

David’s caul at birth = superstition and protection

“Undisciplined heart” = emotional immaturity