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David Copperfield

Charles Dickens · *1849–1850 · original English text*

A boy sets out to tell whether he will be the hero of his own life, and the answer is worked out through cruelty, friendship, foolish love and a long education in truth. Aunt Betsey's rule—never mean, never false, never cruel—becomes the measure of every household David enters, including the one he makes.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it take to become the hero of your own life—talent, charm, or a trained conscience?

"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."
David · Chapter I

Heroism here is not adventure for its own sake. It is learned in Peggotty's loyalty, Aunt Betsey's courage, Agnes's clear-eyed love, and David's late repentance for blindness. Charm without truth, in Steerforth, destroys; steadfastness, in the humble houses, saves.

KEY CHARACTERS

David Copperfield
the teller; blindness slowly cured

Agnes Wickfield
clear-eyed loyalty

Aunt Betsey Trotwood
fierce, just protectiveness

James Steerforth
charm without a conscience

Uriah Heep
false humility; ambition as theft

Dora Spenlow
beloved, unready partner

Mr. Micawber
rhetoric, debt, and a late courage

Peggotty & Mr. Peggotty
unlearned, stubborn love

Little Em'ly
innocence betrayed

The Murdstones
severity mistaken for virtue

A WARNING ABOUT MARRIAGE—AND ABOUT ACCOUNTS

> *"There can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose."*
> **Annie Strong, remembered by David** · Chapter XLV

> *"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery"*
> **Mr. Micawber** · Chapter XII

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 A Child of Affliction

CHAPTERS I–X

A happy start is broken, and a hard school begins.

- David is born at Blunderstone; his father is already dead
- His mother marries the grim **Mr. Murdstone**; Murdstone and Jane rule the house by severity
- David is sent to Salem House, where he meets loyal **Steerforth** and unhappy Tommy Traddles
- His mother and baby brother die; the boy is left with almost no defender but Peggotty

> *"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."*
> **David** · Chapter I

02 The Road to Dover

CHAPTERS XI–XIV

Labor, flight, and a fierce protectress.

- Murdstone puts David to work in the warehouse of Murdstone and Grinby
- He lodges with the improvident, generous **Micawbers**
- He runs away, sells his jacket, and walks to Dover to find his great-aunt **Betsey Trotwood**
- She defies the Murdstones and takes him as her own, with Mr. Dick beside her

03 A New Beginning

CHAPTERS XV–XXIV

School, a vocation, and friends who will matter later.

- David is sent to Dr. Strong's school in Canterbury and meets quiet, faithful **Agnes Wickfield**
- In the Wickfield house he also meets smiling, dangerous **Uriah Heep**
- He becomes a proctor, is befriended again by Steerforth, and is charmed by him still
- Aunt Betsey gives him the rule of his life: never mean, never false, never cruel

> *"be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel. Avoid those three vices, Trot, and I can always be hopeful of you"*
> **Aunt Betsey** · Chapter XV

04 Love and Betrayal

CHAPTERS XXV–XLI

A foolish love, and a crime against a household.

- David falls in love with childlike **Dora Spenlow** and pursues a marriage built on feeling more than fitness
- He takes Steerforth to Yarmouth; Steerforth seduces little Em'ly and she is gone
- Mr. Peggotty sets out to find her; Mrs. Gummidge and Ham are left in wrecked faithfulness
- Aunt Betsey loses her fortune; Uriah Heep's grip on Mr. Wickfield tightens

05 Losses Unmasked

CHAPTERS XLII–LV

Accounts are opened: Heep's, Steerforth's, and David's own.

- Dora's health fails; she dies, still dear, and David begins to see what a true partnership required
- Micawber, employed by Heep, gathers the evidence and exposes him
- Em'ly is found; Steerforth returns in a great storm and is drowned, and Ham dies trying to save him
- The Yarmouth family's wound is not easily healed, but it is not denied

06 A Home at Last

CHAPTERS LVI–LXIV

Grief taught, and a right love recognized.

- David goes abroad, writes, and at last understands his long love for Agnes
- He returns and is given her hand; the household that was nearly stolen is restored
- The Micawbers, and other bruised lives, are given a more honest chance
- The narrator closes as a husband and father, still measuring himself by his aunt's three vices to avoid

Truth vs Charm · Loyalty · Repentance · Steadfast Love · Courage · Memory

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The first sentence is a question the whole book answers. Who, besides David, might be called the hero of this life?
2. Aunt Betsey's three vices—meanness, falsehood, cruelty—are a key. Try them on Murdstone, Steerforth, Heep, and David himself.
3. Steerforth is loved by David almost to the end. What does the book say about charm that will not be ruled?
4. Annie Strong's sentence about "unsuitability of mind and purpose" lands twice: first as a riddle, then as a judgment on David's marriage.
5. Micawber's comedy is also a moral: accounts, in money and in character, come due.
6. Agnes is present long before David can see her rightly. Watch how often she is compared to a light or a sister, and when that language changes.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #766, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/david-copperfield/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.