



Literary café

Charles Dickens

1812-1870

Charles Dickens was an English writer and social critic who is generally regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian period and the creator of some of the world's most memorable fictional characters, especially child characters. During his lifetime Dickens's works enjoyed unprecedented popularity and fame, and by the twentieth century his literary genius was fully recognized by critics and scholars.

His novels and short stories continue to enjoy an enduring popularity among the general reading public.



David Copperfield (1850)

David Copperfield is one of Dickens's best loved novels and he himself referred to it as my "favourite child".

The story

David Copperfield is a bildungsroman, the story of the narrator's life from early childhood to maturity. In it Copperfield describes the obstacles he overcame and the unhappy events he lived through before becoming a successful novelist in later years. The book is an expert blend of fiction and autobiography. While Dickens was not himself an orphan, he felt abandoned by his parents during the harsh experiences of his early years. David Copperfield's father has died before his birth and his mother dies when he is twelve years old. David had led a happy life with his mother and the housekeeper Peggotty until his mother's second marriage to Murdstone, who beats David severely and whose treatment breaks his mother's spirit and finally causes her death. Before her death, Murdstone sends David to Salem House, a school presided over by a master as cruel as Murdstone himself. It is here, however, that David meets two lifelong friends, James Steerforth and Tommy Traddles. With his wife dead, Murdstone, who hates David, send him to work in London. He lodges with the amiable Micawber family. Eventually David runs away from the hated warehouse and becomes the ward of his great-aunt Betsy Trotwood, who sends him to school in Canterbury, a vast improvement over Salem House. Here he lodges with the Wickfields and is attracted to Agnes Wickfield, but dislikes Uriah Heep, her father's obsequious clerk. He studies law under Mr. Spenlow and falls in love and marries his daughter Dora. Micawber and Traddles ultimately expose Uriah Heep as a thief, and the Micawber family immigrates to Australia. David himself eventually becomes a skilled journalist, but shortly after he finds success, his wife Dora dies. After a period of wandering, David begins his career as a popular novelist and marries Agnes.



David's stepfather, Mr Murdstone, is a cruel man and his sister is similar to him. David, who is unable to cope with the emotional stress caused by the two adults, cannot repeat the Maths lesson correctly. For this reason Mr Murdstone decides to beat the boy and to imprison him. Humour and pathos mix together in this passage as well as in most of Dickens's novels.

He walked me up to my room slowly and gravely – I am certain he had a delight in that formal parade of executing justice – and when we got there, suddenly twisted my head under his arm.

‘Mr. Murdstone! Sir!’ I cried to him. ‘Don’t! Pray don’t beat me! I have tried to learn, sir, but I can’t learn while you and Miss Murdstone are by. I can’t indeed!’

‘Can’t you, indeed, David?’ he said. ‘We’ll try that.’

He had my head as in a vice, but I twined round him somehow, and stopped him for a moment, entreating him not to beat me. It was only a moment that I stopped him, for he cut me heavily an instant afterwards, and in the same instant I caught the hand with which he held me in my mouth, between my teeth, and bit it through. It sets my teeth on edge to think of it.

He beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death. Above all the noise we made, I heard them running up the stairs, and crying out – I heard my mother crying out – and Peggotty. Then he was gone; and the door was locked outside; and I was lying, fevered and hot, and torn, and sore, and raging in my puny way, upon the floor.

How well I recollect, when I became quiet, what an unnatural stillness seemed to reign through the whole house! How well I remember, when my smart and passion began to cool, how wicked

I began to feel! I sat listening for a long while, but there was not a sound. I crawled up from the floor, and saw my face in the glass, so swollen, red, and ugly that it almost frightened me. My stripes were sore and stiff, and made me cry afresh, when I moved; but they were nothing to the guilt I felt. It lay heavier on my breast than if I had been a most atrocious criminal, I dare say.

It had begun to grow dark, and I had shut the window (I had been lying, for the most part, with my head upon the sill, by turns crying, dozing, and looking listlessly out), when the key was turned, and Miss Murdstone came in with some bread and meat, and milk. These she put down upon the table without a word, glaring at me the while with exemplary firmness, and then retired, locking the door after her.

Long after it was dark I sat there, wondering whether anybody else would come. When this appeared improbable for that night, I undressed, and went to bed; and, there, I began to wonder fearfully what would be done to me. Whether it was a criminal act that I had committed? Whether I should be taken into custody, and sent to prison? Whether I was at all in danger of being hanged?

I never shall forget the waking, next morning; the being cheerful and fresh for the first moment, and then the being weighed down by the stale and dismal oppression of remembrance. Miss Murdstone reappeared before I was out of bed; told me, in so many words, that I was free to walk in the garden for half an hour and no longer; and retired, leaving the door open, that I might avail myself of that permission.

I did so, and did so every morning of my imprisonment, which lasted five days.



COMPREHENSION

1. Describe David's reaction to the harsh punishment.

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2. The punishment inflicted on David is physical but also psychological and moral. Write what indicates physical pain and what indicates psychological pain:

Physical pain
Psychological pain

3. What type of narrator is employed in the novel?

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4. Fill in the gaps with the words below.

Dark, confusion, extraordinary, mercy, lock, moving, must, Victorian, the child's, astonished

This novel shows an (1)..... understanding of (2)..... point of view. What is particularly (3)..... is the description of the (4).....

of the young boy at the (5)..... of hard and cruel adults. (6)..... families, who did not hesitate to (7)..... "naughty" children in (8)..... closets, must have been (9)..... at the discovery of what their little boy or girls (10)..... have felt.

5. According to many critics *David Copperfield* is a veiled autobiography. Which events in Dickens's life can be compared to David's childhood and youth?

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